

Je'Rol is a man destined to die. Each day is a blessing and a curse on a world where he and those like him are feared and hunted. Like all half-blood demonlords, he is prone to blood rages in which he loses his humanity a little more each time. He can only delay the inevitable end when he will lose himself forever.

Before that happens, he hopes to find peace, but his quest for a legendary talisman to control the demon inside has far-reaching implications for the world of Derandria. Sought by demonlords to maintain their rule of the world and by humans longing to dethrone their demonlord masters, the Obelisk of Mai'Kari has the power to ignite a war. Je'Rol's final days will determine the fate of a world.

**Tiger Born**  
**(A Demon Age Novel)**

**By**  
**Melanie Nilles**

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## Chapter 1

The soft glow of morning through the clouded glass of the single narrow window illuminated the small room of the castle. From where Je'Rol lay on the animal skins, he saw only the two chairs next to the cold hearth and a small table bearing a pitcher and a small basin near the door.

This had been the sorceress's room for keeping him, where she had taunted him the night before with her dispirit power.

Today, he had his mind, his will, and she wasn't there to dull it with her control.

There was her mistake.

Je'Rol sat up, and loose hair fell around his shoulders. The scent of herbs reached his nose, irritating him. Why bother with all the trouble, and how had he slept through it all? In the wild, he awoke at the slightest sound.

Her spell had been more powerful than he expected, unless she had drugged him.

A low growl emanated from his throat. What had she done to him?

His chest had burned when he tried to defy her. His chest—

He unlaced the tunic and in the light of day, saw it—a green stone sunk into the skin of his chest. When he put a hand up, he couldn't touch it. An invisible barrier stopped his fingers from any attempt to dig it out of his flesh.

Liandra shouldn't need talismans to control him. Sorcerers were one of two sects of Adepts, humans with the power to exert their will over half-bloods and lesser demons.

Unless the small stone had another purpose. He didn't intend to stick around and find out.

Je'Rol found his cloak hanging over one of the chairs. A little damp, but it was clean; the blood had been scrubbed out, although a faint hint of the odor lingered in the fabric. Someone wanted him presentable, but for what reason?

It wouldn't matter if he escaped; he had no interest in the humans' affairs, only in his search for the Obelisk of Mai'Kari to gain control of his demonlord half and end the blood rages stealing his life. He didn't need humans taking what little remained.

After securing the cloak around his neck, he found the leather strap with which he had tied his white and black hair of his demonlord half and wrapped it in a tail once more. He flipped up his hood and tried the heavy wooden door, expecting it to be locked. At his tug, it whipped open and slammed into the wall beside him.

He hesitated at the open door. Guards stood on either side in their light armor bearing the black and gold crest of their human lord master, which included a bear in the center. It didn't surprise him, considering the territory in which they lived. Honoring the bear clan with their likeness should appease them into allowing their Lord Bannon to rise in rank among the humans.

They crossed spears before him.

"You're to wait for *Serae* Liandra. Lord Bannon's orders." The one on his right spoke in a coarse voice, his face lined with age to match his confidence.

The other was young and nervous, by the flash of his throat when he swallowed and the rapid pounding of his heart in the silence of the empty corridor.

Beneath his cloak, Je'Rol extended claws in preparation. They were no threat to him.

Faster than they could blink, he grabbed the spears and splintered the shafts against the door frame. A second later, the old soldier pressed the cold metal of his blade to Je'Rol's throat, while the young man stood in place yet.

"Back into the room, half-blood," the man snarled.

The human was quicker than Je'Rol had anticipated but not near strong enough to subdue him. The scent of blood overpowered the stench of sweat. Wetness tickled down Je'Rol's throat, cooling his skin.

The beast of his demonlord half growled, but the man didn't flinch from the threat.

Je'Rol debated his chances against the swordsman. He was unusually swift in his reaction for a human guard, more like the elite Li'Ador, the demon fighters who trained the Adepts seeking to become demon hunters. That one was confident in his skills, too, a dangerous combination. Although not dressed in the black and silver armor, he had the skills of the elite warriors. Lord Lord Bannon must have paid him well to give up his allegiance.

A wrong move and Je'Rol would be skewered. With the healing abilities of his demonlord half, such a wound wouldn't kill him, but it would disable him for most of the day. The soldier was only one man. Je'Rol could take him, if he did this right.

Je'Rol backed into the room, the soldier following every step. Once inside, he waited for the soldier to retreat from the room. The point of the sword lowered from his throat, the tip shimmering with a red line of blood. The man backed away, his sword held in preparation to strike any second.

Another move—

Je'Rol whirled and slashed the space where the soldier should have been. A flash of silver swung at him, and he dodged left, swinging his arm to catch the young man and throw him against the wall. The boy was no threat, and killing would only fuel the desire for blood from the beast within him.

No. His conflict was with the old soldier. Hatred had flared in the old soldier's eyes while he had held the sword at Je'Rol's throat.

Je'Rol wouldn't kill, but he could disable.

Fire flared in his chest in that moment of hesitation, distracting him from the soldiers.

In a blink, metal glinted before him.

"Stop!" A woman's voice echoed through the corridor.

Je'Rol staggered away from the point pressing into his chest and blinked. Outlined in a dusty slant of sunlight from the window to his right, a cloaked, lithe form broke from the shadow of the alcove.

Her shoes barely made a sound on the floor in her rush to join them.

She pressed the old soldier's hand down. "Do not hurt him."

"He attacked us." Menace snarled in the man's voice.

"He's needed alive by Lord Bannon. Would you reject your lord's orders?"

He glared at her for several seconds, and lifted the sword to her face. "I was defending my life."

Liandra whispered in a strange language and the symbols tattooed along the edge of her face and covering her arms glowed briefly as she touched the bloody edge. It sizzled and bubbled, the blood caking and flaking off in seconds. "Put it away, Captain. He's not to be harmed."

"He tried to leave. Our orders were to keep him here until you returned."

Her glare lightened into a coy smile. "And where am I?"

The old soldier's sharp eyes darted to Je'Rol and back to Liandra, and he bowed his head in defeat. A moment later, he straightened and slammed the sword into the scabbard belted to his waist, a scowl darkening on Je'Rol.

"Good. Stand watch that we are not disturbed."

He said nothing but reclaimed his position next to the door, opposite the young man, who pulled himself to his feet and took his position.

The sorceress stopped before Je'Rol, her dark eyes staring into him. "Sit in the chair, Je'Rol."

Her knuckles tightened around something in her hand, but the fire didn't yet ignite.

Seeing little choice, he backed away to one of the two chairs.

The door thumped closed as she sat down opposite him. Liandra leaned back into a casual position and crossed her calves by sliding one slender leg over the other.

Her hand opened so only she saw what was inside. By the tint of green on her face, he could guess what held her gaze. The stone was important to her.

"Clearly I underestimated you," she murmured. In the silence of the room, her low voice rang clear. "You awoke sooner than I expected."

He didn't like the sound of that, but waited. Humans hated silence. It made them nervous.

Liandra stared at the stone. The hint of green on her smooth, tawny skin vanished.

After a few minutes of silence gelling between them, her eyes lifted. "The journey to Dev Nadir will take several days and hundreds of servants and guards. You won't be so lucky if you try to escape, not with a dozen Li'Ador."

They could just as well have called the demon hunters. A dozen Li'Ador could easily keep him disabled, if not kill him. The warriors had earned the respect of normal humans by protecting them from demons and adhered to a rigid code. They had no special powers, but their martial skills were unmatched, which was why the Adepts of Te'Mea went to them to learn to become demon hunters.

Je'Rol had once fought and killed several Li'Ador. The fight had been gruesome and difficult. On the brink of death by the unnatural speed and skill of the warriors who caught him, the beast within him had arisen. He remembered waking next to a dead horse and two bloody bodies shredded by claws, a horrible wound in his side.

He didn't want to think what a dozen Li'Ador might do to him. Death was a good possibility.

If Lord Bannon had employed a dozen of the warriors, he might have others protecting his fortress.

Liandra's smile taunted him from escape considerations. His thoughts might be his own, or they might not. Her power over him only led him to believe he was free to choose. He couldn't trust his own thoughts as long as she held that power.

"Do you like bleeding?" She closed her hand around the green stone with the gray ring around it, hiding it from his sight.

He had almost forgotten the guard's sword. Je'Rol swiped the coolness on his neck and studied the shine of blood on his fingertips. A small wound, it would heal before midday. He wiped his fingers on his cloak and crossed his arms, unconcerned by the small scrape. Here they were again, back to the game she had played last night, but her body odor perfumed like a garden. "What do you want?"

She leaned forward, her free hand reaching for his knee while the one with the amulet balanced across her bent legs. That wasn't the hand he wanted. He'd let her have her fun, until the amulet came into reach.

"What do you think I want?" she asked.

"My cooperation in a scheme plotted by Lord Bannon," he grumbled.

She stroked his knee. "You know so little."

"Then tell me."

"You'll learn when the time comes." Her hand slid up his thigh. It brought her body with it and the hand he sought.

Je'Rol snatched her hand with the green stone and pulled it close. She made no attempt to fight.

"What is it, Je'Rol?" Her voice was silky smooth, a touch of seductiveness haunting her tone. "What's in my hand?"

She was too calm. Or was this part of her game?

He pried open her fingers and dug out the gem, a deep emerald set into a narrow medallion of metal bearing symbols like those tattooed on her body.

The smirk on her face said she wasn't worried about him having it. If it wasn't the source of her power, what was it?

He held it up between thumb and forefinger, his other hand still clamped around her wrist.

"What is it?"

"If it were important, do you think I would risk you taking it?"

"What is it?" He tightened his fingers around her wrist, letting the claws extend to pinch her. No more games!

She winced but it didn't dull her smile or cause her to struggle. He caught a new smell, the subtle change of her scent hinting of something he knew well—fear.

Fire ignited in his chest. He tightened his grip, ready to crush her bones.

"You cannot hurt me, Je'Rol."

Heat flared through him from his chest so each breath choked as if inhaling the blaze. He gasped for air and scratched at the glow.

She backed away and the fire subsided.

He no longer held her or the green stone, but leaned on hands and knees, wheezing for clear air.

A soft touch ran down his head. "My poor boy. It seems you've learned nothing from our time together, but you will."

She knelt before him, a finger on his chin lifting his face to her. He growled but restrained himself from tearing her apart. Air filled his lungs, cool and a bit dank but welcome after the fire. He jerked his head away in defiance.

"You will obey." Liandra stood, the fingers of her left hand clenched once more around the stone held inches from him. "Come now, Je'Rol."

His body obeyed and rose from the floor, and his feet carried him to the door without question. She knocked and the young guard opened the door for her. A blotch of discoloration formed on his cheek.

"He's ready now," Liandra said.

The older guard gave Je'Rol a dark glare but said nothing.

Je'Rol pulled his hood over his head and followed the sorceress. The stone wasn't important. Hurting her did nothing but cause him more pain. Killing her was the last option, but he would if it meant his freedom.

No. That was her control on him. She didn't have to say anything. With her near, he couldn't trust his own thoughts; but she couldn't control him if she was unconscious. Or was that the reason for the stone?

She used him, and he wanted to know what Lord Bannon planned in Dev Nadir. Curiosity restrained him, not her power.

The tromping of boots on stone echoed through the corridor. Liandra led him to the alcove, which made a sharp angle into another corridor lined by narrow windows.

As they passed, he looked to his right over a rocky decline of land down to a village around which a protective wall rose up. Each glimpse through the glass gave him a piece of the picture he put together. Through the windows on his left lay a courtyard surrounded by the stone walls of the fortress, a pond in the middle with a tree hanging over it. A group of men in formal attire and ladies in fancy dresses mingled about, many sitting on stone benches lining the open area. Small etchings of bears climbed the corner columns.

Beyond the covered but open walkway on the other side of the courtyard rose the smooth stone wall of several floors of fortress topped by a tiled roof.

"This way, Je'Rol." Liandra motioned with her finger to follow her through a doorway.

He hesitated, until the old guard stepped close behind him. The scrape of his movements and the faint ring of metal hinted of his eagerness to skewer Je'Rol with that sword.

A low growl rose from Je'Rol's throat, but he followed the sorceress through a doorway and a short corridor on their right to another doorway. There, Liandra paused. Dark columns rose throughout the hall, almost blending in among the armed guards in their strict rows facing the center, where the rows of black and silver Li'Ador armor formed a clear aisle. Their eyes burned him in the fire of their hatred.

Je'Rol tensed, his claws extending in preparation to fight. The beast rose inside him but didn't try to escape. He would never win against that many Li'Ador.

Liandra whispered to him, "Follow me. Walk quietly and they won't move."

He glared down at her dark hair. Now was not the best time to attack her for his freedom. That time would come when they were away from the threat.

"Dev Nadir awaits." Liandra strode into the hall.

The beast side of him waited on a breath for a reason to take over, while Je'Rol followed the sorceress's gliding steps and tried not to think about the danger around him.

Ahead, a double door with brass vines circling an inlaid brass and iron scene of bears in a forest stood open to a stone-lined yard filled by mounted soldiers around three carriages.

Once through the hall of soldiers, he stepped out into sunlight and pulled his hood low to shade his eyes. The soldiers sat quietly atop their horses, but their hatred penetrated the air around him with a menace that taunted the beast to rise.

Not yet. When the time came, he might not have a choice but to unleash the demon side. If he could avoid the blood rage, he would, and so far, the threat on his life was minimal. Patience would be his best ally.

On the cool breeze from the mountains towering over them, the scent of horses rose with the sweat of men. A path of road cut among the boulders and trees curved down among the natural barriers and the stone buildings of the village built on the same hillside.

Je'Rol took in the numbers of soldiers, particularly the black and silver armor with the black traveling cloaks. Lord Bannon must have had money to pay for all this. The bear clan was generous to allow him to rise to such power. A small part of him was curious why, but the matters of the humans were no more his than those of the demonlords. He wished to avoid them all.

Liandra motioned him to follow her to one of the carriages. In the open outdoors, he hesitated and twisted back to view the palace, for that was what it was, more than a fortress to keep out the natters, the lowest, stupidest of demons. A quick jump would launch him over the heads and spears of the soldiers to the roof. In a couple more, he could be down the rocky hillside or up the mountain.

He'd never make it.

Je'Rol blinked away the doubts tearing through his desire for freedom and turned with a growl to the woman next to the open door of the carriage.

The dark eyes of the sorceress held him, a touch of knowing in her taunting smile. "Come," she said.

He stepped up to the dark carriage interior before her. She followed and took the seat across from him.

The guards that had followed them out shut the door. No one had attacked or stopped him. Either they had been given explicit orders or... "They don't know."

"They know what but not who." At the jingle of bits and fittings, she gazed out the window. "It was necessary to secure the Li'Ador."

He'd bet it was, and it would be a fair bet to win that Lord Bannon paid heavily for them to leave Je'Rol alive rather than kill him.

With a call from somewhere in the waiting group, the clatter of hooves on stone surrounded them. The carriage lurched and rolled forward.

Je'Rol stretched his legs to the bottom of the seat on which the sorceress sat, bracing himself in a slouch with his arms across his chest. The carriage angled down the winding path, and the ring of hooves on stone muffled when they reached the hard-packed soil of the road.

"How long to Dev Nadir?" Rarely had he traveled the roads. Although he had arrived on the Karaligo continent a couple years ago in his search for the obelisk, he always traveled the wilds and avoided the demonlords where he could. Hiding who he was on a world that feared or despised him from either side meant never staying anywhere long enough to reveal himself, and yet Liandra had found him.

"Three days." Her eyes fixed on the land passing outside the window to her left.

Three days by carriage would have been a little more than a day alone for him, or a rider staying on fresh horses; but the carriage horses required rest and food and weren't built for fast travel. Three days meant plenty of opportunity to escape, if he could break the control she had on him.

## Chapter 2

Throughout the first day, Je'Rol held his tongue, watching the sorceress and observing her. The bouncing of the carriage made it impossible to rest while they traveled, but he tried. He would need to stay alert come nightfall.

His plans to escape at night proved futile, as a dozen Li'Ador surrounded him and the sorceress used her power to command him to sleep where they camped in the open. He couldn't resist her dispirit and woke to her standing over him the next morning. A low growl rumbled in his throat with his irritation, but with the Li'Ador alert around him, he dared not retaliate and quickly ate the food they offered.

Afterwards, they prodded him to enter the carriage. Je'Rol growled and extended his claws for the next man who dared crowd too close. Amid the soldiers half a head shorter, he caught a glimpse of the black-bearded Lord Cair Bannon in his finery among a group of armored soldiers.

A woman with long golden hair stood back from them, her amber gown fitting her tall, slim figure with an elegance not possessed of any human he had ever seen. She said nothing but glanced at Je'Rol, her face pinched in a dark scowl.

He froze at the steps of the carriage, struggling against the beast demanding release to defend itself, but not from the Li'Ador. The golden lady set off a warning within him by her presence. Instinct said she was more than an ordinary woman.

She watched him, a hint of menace on her face.

"Inside," one of the guards ordered.

Je'Rol snarled and all voices quieted. The woman approached, a motion to the guards all she needed for them to move aside in deference.

His heart raced with each step she took. The dignity and poise with which she carried herself multiplied the imminent threat of her presence, but he refused to back down. No human would hold him prisoner for long, not even one as terrible and beautiful as her.

"Do as you're told, half-blood." Her voice snapped the order as if trained in the art of command, something he fully expected from a lady of nobility.

He served no one and let her know in a growl.

Her eyes narrowed. Silence hung over the land as if no one dared breathe. From his position among the soldiers, Lord Bannon watched, the exposed areas of his face paling in sharp contrast to his black hair and beard.

"Be grateful for the mercy shown you," the golden lady said in a threatening voice.

Words betrayed him to argue with her. Or was it more? Something about her forbade him from arguing, but it wasn't for lack of words. The way she carried herself commanded respect, and fear. Only a fully trained sorceress might show such confidence, but the golden lady wore no tattoos like Liandra.

"Why should I care?" Je'Rol growled and held up one clawed hand in threat. Sunlight glinted off the nails extended into sharp claws ready to tear through flesh.

Her lip twitched, but she stayed her ground. Either very brave or very stupid, it didn't matter. When he made his move, anyone who stood between him and freedom would be slashed.

Lord Bannon came up behind her. "My lady, your carriage is ready." He made no move to touch her but stepped back out of her way.

For several seconds, she glared at Je'Rol. Then, without a word, she turned, her chin held high, and followed Lord Bannon to a second carriage. Lord Bannon bowed and offered her a hand, which she briefly took in her step up; and he closed the door and walked away.

Interesting. Who was really in charge?

And who was this woman who could inspire a chill in him, Je'Rol, half-blood tiger demonlord? Her scent was carried away by the wind blowing from him, or he might have had a base to identify her.

"Inside, half-blood."

Je'Rol whirled on the guard with a snarl. Over a dozen Li'Ador closed around him, armed with spears and swords, some with bows taut with arrows and full quivers upon their backs.

"Come, Je'Rol," Liandra invited from within the dark carriage.

Unless he wanted to be slashed into a thousand pieces, he had only one choice. The damned sorceress had him, and she knew it. Next time.

Growling, he climbed in and sat down.

Liandra gazed at him, the corners of her mouth lifted slightly.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"You'll see in two more days."

"Tell me, sorceress." He lunged for her, claws ready.

Fire seared through his chest as he grasped her shoulders and pinched. It filled his body, consuming him in pain.

Not again. He refused to give in.

Through clenched teeth, he growled at her. "Tell...me."

Her face inches from his revealed a moment of fear beneath the calm façade, but it could have been a mistake. She smiled in spite of the rapid pulse within his grasp.

The burning increased in his chest with the glow from the stone. It both enraged and subdued the beast he wished to unleash upon her.

"You cannot hurt me."

The pain blotted out his surroundings, intensifying each second he held her. Claws retracted and he stumbled back, gasping for breath.

Sweat plastered his hair to his cheeks and neck, but the heat decreased each second he sat away from her. His clothes stuck to him. Although he'd lost to her power, Je'Rol had seen the truth. She feared him. But why rely on the stone and not her own power? Or was she weak?

"Sit, Je'Rol, and enjoy the ride." Amusement touched her quiet voice.

The beast vanished deep inside, unable to escape in her presence.

"I hoped I could trust you, but I see that I'm mistaken." Her voice flowed in a silken serenity to match the lift of her full lips. She crossed her legs and, beneath her cloak, crossed her bare, tattooed arms, which poked out through the part of fabric.

He wanted to hurt her. He wanted to kill her for what she had done to him. The beast agreed, but now that he desired its cold compassion in bloodshed, it could not break the invisible cage of restraint she had built around it.

"What have you done to me?"

She leaned forward, her eyes dancing with cold malice. "You are mine, Je'Rol." Her voice bore a sinister edge that hadn't been there until now.

He'd heard rumors of the dark powers controlled by sorcerers, who seemed to thrive on the fear and mystery surrounding them. The demonlords would be right to massacre the Adepts of

Te'Mea, but they had nothing to fear. Demonlords were immortal, untouchable by any magic, and they occasionally found both sects useful—sorcerers and demon hunters.

Je'Rol had never subscribed to any rumors, choosing instead to judge each individual on their actions.

*Serae* Liandra fit the dark descriptions of most rumors concerning the sorcerers, thriving on misleading him with wrong turns to freedom. Likely knowing none would survive, she had sent soldiers to plant something on him giving her control of all of him. Not only could she control the demon side, which she subdued with her will, but she also controlled his human side, and no Adept could do that. He needed to find a way to remove that stone, or the magic she used.

Until then, he could only sit and ponder the situation and the woman who had imprisoned him within his own body.

During the brief midday break, he was allowed outside only to eat and relieve himself with a full escort of Li'Ador watching his every move. He never saw anything of Lord Bannon or the lady with the golden hair.

By the end of the day, he yearned to stretch his legs and run the moment the guards opened the carriage door.

Over a dozen Li'Ador were ready for him.

Je'Rol clenched his fingers into tight fists. They held their weapons drawn and ready, a nasty blade at the end of each staff and arrows taut against bowstrings. At the memory of a previous battle with the Li'Ador and the pain he'd suffered after recovering control from the beast, he shuddered.

Over a dozen of those weapons aimed at him now. Despite connecting to the demonlord side, he could not release the beast. He could fight as he was, but he would be no match without the full ferocity of the tiger. Any other time he would be grateful for the restraint.

"Step down, half-blood." One of the officers said.

Je'Rol ignored him, his legs tightening in anticipation of a jump that would carry him over men and horses to the security of the boulders breaking the foliage beyond them. Once there, he could disappear into the crevices and trees of the mountains around them. Only the bear clan could stop him.

Fire flared in his chest, startling him off balance. The ground cracked against his shoulder and he rolled to his back as the sorceress stepped out, a satisfied look on her dark-complexioned face with her cowl off her head.

"You will follow orders." She spoke in that sensual, teasing voice. The soldiers hurried away from her approach. "Come now."

The heat faded, leaving him cool in the crisp air. Je'Rol climbed to his feet next to the small, lithe figure. Those dark eyes gazed through him, demanding that he obey.

He let out a low growl, but it sounded like a whimper.

When she whispered in a strange tongue, a cloud of darkness blanketed everything, as if twilight had come, yet no one questioned it.

He blinked but could not clear his vision or the cold that settled inside of him.

As if from far away, she whispered, "This way."

Now a shadow shimmering with strange symbols glowing on sections of her skin exposed outside her cloak, the sorceress stepped away from the carriage. The guards parted before her. Je'Rol followed through the shadows of the men. The myriad scents surrounding him muted with his vision and sounds muffled.

But through the shadowy darkness, a figure of normal lighting stood out behind the crowd of men. He hesitated, hoping for a better look. The golden hair bobbed over the shadows.

"Come, Je'Rol," Liandra's voice beckoned.

His feet moved against his will to obey the sorceress. He struggled to keep an eye on the figure through the shadows, but it disappeared.

A whisper touched the pain in his chest and the darkness lifted, revealing a cavern before him in the rocky side of the mountain.

"You will sleep here tonight," Liandra stated.

He growled his annoyance with the cave and the danger of dark places as nests to natters, despite the efforts of the Adepts and the Li'Ador to cleanse the world of the pests. It was no better than imprisonment in her room while she taunted him with her magic. Even worse were no windows or fire. But with the Li'Ador standing off, the threat of impalement eased from his mind.

"Any food with that?" His stomach rumbled as if to emphasize the ache in his gut.

A patronizing smile lifted her cheeks. "Soon."

Not soon enough. Je'Rol looked back at the two hundred or more men and a few women settling around the carriages and horses.

While the Li'Ador may not have followed them to the cave, they stood at rigid attention, their bows or staves in their hands. Beneath a dozen helmets, their eyes watched him without wavering.

He snarled at them, but they never flinched.

"Wait inside, Je'Rol," the sorceress commanded softly.

Inside was out of their sight. He ducked the low overhang and entered a cavern larger than the room in the palace where she had held him. No natters and no scent of them having been there recently, but it would have negated Lord Bannon's purpose for him. He stood up under a tall ceiling, the sorceress behind him.

"Sit."

Her voice grated on his nerves, but he resisted the urge to bend his legs and collapse. The power of the request was lighter than other times. Had something weakened her, or didn't she care?

A weak sorceress might grant him a chance of escape. Claws extended beneath his cloak, ready to fight his way to freedom.

"Sit," she said more firmly.

The urge to sit rose strongly in him. Fighting her will over his made him tremble and stumble backwards.

"My will is yours. You will do as I command."

"No."

Her eyes narrowed and a faint light shone from beneath her cloak a moment before the fire flared in his chest. "You must give up, Je'Rol." Her voice whispered through his head with the seduction of relief from the pain.

He couldn't fight her, not when his chest burned, but he tried.

The fire seared through him, all consuming in its intensity. He gasped for air but it burned his lungs. The stone glowed from his chest and he clutched at it to scratch it off but could not touch it.

His knees weakened and he collapsed before the sorceress, struggling for air. Sweat stuck his hair and clothes to his skin.

She squatted down and lifted his chin with a finger. Part of him wanted to wipe the smile from her face with the swipe of a claw, but the other part of him restrained it, insisting he listen to her.

"My dear Je'Rol." Her other hand stroked his loose hair from his face, her touch gentle, almost loving.

It was wrong. She didn't care for him, except for how she could bend his will to obey and carry out whatever plans she had for him.

"I would comfort you and give you a place to lay your head, if you'd let me."

Yes, he wanted that.

No, he didn't. Damn her. She caressed him, touched him as if she loved him; but he felt nothing, only a shadow of a memory long buried.

This had to end, before he lost himself to the confusion of his thoughts.

Claws scratched on rock, but he could not raise them against her. Tears cooled his eyes of the burning still enveloping him.

"Why do you fight it? I can control the demon. You can be free, a half-blood accepted by others because you don't lose control. Isn't that what you've wanted all your life?"

Yes.

But not from her and not like this.

Through clenched teeth, he growled and blinked to clear his vision of her. "I would rather be a slave to the beast—" The burning raged through his chest and his arms ached— "Than a slave to you."

"My poor, misguided half-blood. I can give you freedom."

His ears deceived him, or she did. What game did she play now?

Quivering in agony but determined not to give in this time, he watched her for signs of truth. A faint hope lit inside him that she meant what she said in the way he wanted her to say it; but he doubted she played fair. Liandra had no reason to release him from her control, not when she could use him for her own means.

She leaned forward, her breath cool on his sweaty neck. "Trust me."

He wanted to laugh, but could barely breathe through the pain.

She backed off but, a few seconds later, set a plate of food on the ground before him. "Eat now and rest. I'll return after you've had time to reconsider."

Her feet padded softly away through the mouth of the cavern, taking the fire with them.

Weakened from fighting her magic, Je'Rol rested his head against the cool, dank ground and breathed to calm his racing heart. He was accustomed to traveling whole days on foot without exhaustion, but this was magic, and more powerful than he'd ever expected. What did they want with him?

He turned his head and stared out the low opening of the cavern. Several Li'Ador stood watch at the entrance, three with their backs to him and four standing alert facing him. Beyond them, he saw little, but the steady drone of voices and clinks and squeaks of armor merged. It was as if he didn't exist and the world went on without him.

To most of them, he probably didn't. This was the way he preferred it—that no one think about him. They did, though, or the Li'Ador wouldn't be standing watch.

Cold meat waited within arm's reach, along with a hard, dry roll. It wasn't much, but the meat would replenish his strength. He'd had the chance for water in the carriage.

Je'Rol's hand shook as he reached for the plate and pulled it near, the scrape of metal on stone echoing to the high ceiling of the cavern. Fresh, raw kill would have been preferable to the day old cooked meat, but he had no choice and chewed it down with the stale bread. Afterwards, he sat with his head back against the rock and closed his eyes.

Still weak from Liandra's magic, he rested. He'd need his strength if he had the chance to escape. Getting past the Li'Ador would be a challenge requiring everything he had, if he could disable the sorceress.

Small chance of that, but if the opportunity presented itself, he wouldn't be sitting around.

Except the more determined he was, the stronger the magic she used against him. How far would she go towards breaking him completely?

With his eyes closed, he listened to the buzz of conversations outside.

Soldiers speculated about the purpose of their journey to Dev Nadir and the territory under Lord Sidek Chandroya, the local governor. Apparently the man had a penchant for sports, particularly the more gruesome Dao'Larashi, where trained warriors fought to the death while a whole arena of spectators cheered them on.

And Lord Bannon was taking him to the city of this blood-thirsty ruler. Humans were no better than their demonlord masters when given enough freedom.

"I hear his best came from Ragren, a giant of a man. Undefeated in eight years, supposedly. Lord Chandroya bought him a few years ago for his weight in gold."

Bought him? As Je'Rol suspected from bits of conversation he'd caught in his travels, the Dao fighters were slaves.

"Right." By the tone, the other man was anything but agreeing. "No one has that kind of money sitting around."

"Ah, but rumors say the domain of the H'Shasa clan is rich with gold and gems and they freely trade with the humans through the ports of Dev Nadir."

The H'Shasa clan. Je'Rol had met one while traveling through their domain years ago, a large island named Hathaen. In their original forms, the demonlords who ruled it were strange, almost horse-like predators whose four long legs extended from a scaly, heavily-muscled body to claws. From that body, their spike-lined necks tapered to a head that resembled something between that of a horse and that of the dragon clan with sharp teeth for tearing flesh. Unlike a horse or dragon, they could snap their long, snakelike tails like whips. As fierce and swift as their beast forms, the H'Shasa demonlords were quite the opposite in nature, though no less discriminating, than any other demonlords towards half-bloods.

The demonlord had let Je'Rol go only after he promised never to return.

Je'Rol never looked back, but neither did he forget the gentle nature of the H'Shasa clan in contrast to their frightening appearance.

"Chandroya bought this fighter for his weight in gold?" The new man's voice was like rocks grinding. "Feh. Ain't no man worth that."

"Maybe not, but Lord Chandroya must think so," the third man said.

Another man chuckled. "Let 'im."

"Yeah. It's his gold to waste."

"No. I mean that," the calm, casual voice said.

"What?"

Their voices lowered, but Je'Rol focused on the source of the sound, his ears keener than any human's.

"What do you think is in there?" the calm man asked.

A pause, then a gasp.

"Yes."

"He wouldn't dare. In the blood rage—" the rocky-voiced man said.

"He knows. Lord Bannon hasn't said anything, but I suspect that's the purpose of this parade and the sorceress to keep him under control... until the right time. All the strength and agility of the demonlords but none of the control. Let a half-blood loose and—" He cut off.

So that was it.

Je'Rol let out a sigh. They wanted him to defeat the undefeated Dao fighter. What if he didn't want to fight?

Liandra would probably see to that. Maybe that's what she meant by his freedom—turning him loose on an unsuspecting human who would be no match at any skill level alone with a half-blood of Je'Rol's experience. He was probably the oldest surviving half-blood; no wonder she had sought him specifically. Most died early at the hands of demon hunters or Li'Ador, or lost themselves when the blood rage grew too savage.

"So long, Lord Chandroya's Dao fighter." The man's voice muffled as if behind a mug.

"Hello, Lord Bannon as the top Dao fighter owner."

"Or all the gold Chandroya can throw at him for the half-blood."

A few mumbles of agreement followed that.

"Speculation and rumor," the rocky-voiced man scoffed.

"It makes sense."

Je'Rol growled, ready to strip Lord Bannon of his skin if he came near. Was that the reason for the sorceress and his captivity to her will? Perhaps she sought to subdue the beast to level his killing skills against the human fighter. He didn't need the demon side to kill. He was stronger, faster, and more tolerant of pain than any mere human. Coupled with a sense of smell and hearing that alerted him to the subtle reactions accompanying a human's thoughts, he often downed his opponents before they finished their attack posture.

"It's damned right speculation," another man said. "Messenger came a fortnight ago to deliver news of a Dao Larashi tournament. It opens seventh night after the rise of Karnoss."

"Five days from now."

"That's no coincidence."

The star of Karnoss only came into view for a limited time each year, though sometimes twice. It must have emerged from the western horizon during his night in Lord Bannon's palace. He was no astronomer and didn't care about the stars except for navigation across the domains, and this.

The men hushed, but Je'Rol had heard enough. Now he understood the reason Lord Bannon desired him.

He had one more day to plan his escape, if the sorceress let her guard down.

### Chapter 3

Liandra returned soon after the soldiers' conversation about the Dao Larashi moved on to other topics, but Je'Rol said nothing. Rather, he cooperated with her requests and didn't fight the commands forcing his body to yield to her will.

After the soldiers quieted, Je'Rol laid back on the dirt around the small fire he shared with the sorceress, one arm under his head and the other across his chest.

The dank, moldy scent of the cave mixed with the smoke of the fire to overwhelm the sorceress's human scent. Without that distraction, he could imagine that he was alone again in the wilderness.

Except that a dozen or more soldiers probably stood watch for natters. The lesser demons had never given up their taste for human flesh, but their numbers decreased every year through the efforts of the Li'Ador and the demon hunters. The chances of the average person being attacked by one of the lesser demons were less than being attacked by highwaymen, particularly along the main roads. Natters preferred dark places and only emerged to hunt at night.

"Not even a growl?" Liandra spoke in a quiet voice as if afraid to crack the silence. "This is unlike you. Not the least little bit of fight?"

How ironic. She wanted him to fight, now of all times. That was the last thing he would give her—what she wanted. It would seem that in not opposing her he was opposing her.

The faint scrape of fabric foretold her movements, but the soft footfalls told him more.

"I'm disappointed," she whispered, her voice close and irritating on his patience.

Through the open part of his hood partially obstructing his vision, he saw her legs. She knelt on the ground next to him, her knees pressing against his right side.

A second later, her hands rested on his chest. She lowered her face to peek under his hood and whispered in that strange language.

His hood slid back.

"Leave me alone," he growled.

One tattooed hand slid up his chest and pulled down the laced collar of his tunic. A sly smile spread across her face, pulling back the odd markings around her ears. The sorceress's finger traced what he guessed was the stone on his chest, but he felt nothing. Whatever it was, she had placed a spell on it to prevent touching that area.

The stone could only be removed by magic, something he didn't have.

He tried to ignore her and closed his eyes to rest of his own free will, before she commanded him into a deep slumber.

The warmth of her cheek brushed against his. "Not yet, Je'Rol," she whispered.

Her words opposed his desire to rest, irritating him into snarling.

"That's my boy." She sounded far too pleased.

That's as far as he went. No more playing her games, not if she wanted him to fight her, or to fight anyone.

Her hands slid off, but only to support her body over him on four limbs with her legs straddling his hips. Black hair fell like a curtain around her face above his.

"We have one more night before reaching Dev Nadir." Her voice barely broke a whisper. "Tell me what you really want."

"I want to be left alone." He grabbed her shoulders and shoved her off.

A small grunt escaped her as she landed on her bottom next to the fire. Next time he'd aim for those flames, or what little remained.

Annoyance flashed across her face, and she stood and dusted herself. Whatever anger or shock she had felt passed, replaced by a satisfied smile; but he wouldn't soon forget that he had broken that calm demeanor.

Je'Rol tugged the hood back over his head and closed out the world, especially the sorceress.

Unfortunately, it didn't stop her from kneeling over his side again, this time by his head. "Sleep until I tell you to wake."

His eyelids fell heavily, and his mind blurred. A deep breath later, the world cut off.

\* \* \*

*Je'Rol walked through a world cloaked in black, chasing a light which shrank away the faster he ran to catch it. Through briars and lakes and deserts and valleys, he chased the light, almost certain what it was; but to no avail. The light diminished in the far distance.*

*The land beneath his feet gave way and he fell through nothing.*

*Until a faint voice called to him with the soothing tone of someone concerned: "Je'Rol."*

*The sun rose on him standing on a thick branch high among the trees. Somewhere below, a golden shape strolled among the trunks, something on four legs, but he couldn't see it clearly. He crouched and watched, suspicious and extending his claws in preparation to defend himself.*

*The shape emerged from a place it logically should not have and much closer.*

*"Je'Rol," the gentle voice called to him. "I cannot undo this at once, but I will do what I can."*

*The sun grew brighter, and hotter. He fanned himself but it wasn't enough. He stripped off his cloak. Still, the fire burned. His body burned, stealing his breath to leave him gasping.*

Awareness returned, and with it, a desire to disfigure the sorceress.

"Quiet," a voice firmly whispered.

The fire from his chest burned throughout his body. In one swipe, he extended claws and slashed at the hooded shape over him. Claws caught in a firm contact.

The figure jumped back and tucked an arm close, the face hidden behind a golden cowl.

The burning faded and his head cleared to make sense of what he saw. Beyond the figure next to him and the embers of what had been his fire, the bare feet of the sorceress were unmistakable in the faint light of the fires flickering outside. If the sorceress wasn't the figure, then who—

He sniffed. The smell wasn't human. The sorceress nearby gave off a pungent odor, and the whiff of wood smoke from the dead fire tangled with it, but he recognized nothing familiar about the stranger. This one bore a clean scent.

The stranger stood up in the dark of the cave, the faint scrape of cloth the only sound made. In the shadow of the hood, he could make out nothing of the face of the person who broke the enchantment.

"Stay, Je'Rol," the stranger whispered in a voice too soft for a man. "I'll do what I can to break the spell, but you must act as if nothing has changed."

"Who are you?"

"Another time. Return to sleep now or my efforts are wasted." She glanced aside at the sorceress and hurried from the cave.

He considered following, but not at the sight of the Li'Ador standing watch. They made no move to seize the cloaked figure passing their line, nor did anyone speak. They must have seen her, unless she was a ghost, but he could not have clawed a ghost.

Silence fell back upon his world. He scratched at the tingling in his chest but could not remove whatever was there. She had done something to the power but had not broken it completely, if he understood her.

He knew of only two groups of people who might break the magic of a sorcerer—another sorcerer or a demonlord. Neither group seemed likely to help him, but someone was; someone the Li'Ador trusted or who gave them no concern. He hoped she returned another night to finish what she started.

Until then, he would rest. Tomorrow would be an interesting day. Je'Rol closed his eyes and stretched out with a sigh. The questions slipped aside with his fatigue.

Sometime after he fell asleep, the soft scuffle of movement woke him. He listened.

"Come," a voice whispered, most likely not to him.

Je'Rol listened and remained still. The scrape of movement faded.

"What is it?" Liandra's voice cracked with sleepiness.

"What happened with him? I thought you had control." Lord Bannon's hushed voice carried a tone of anger.

"He is under my control. You'll reach Dev Nadir without problems."

A pause followed her words, then "I'm told he attacked you in the carriage."

"He tried, but the stone stopped him."

"I thought you didn't need talismans to subdue demons. You're an Adept."

"Yes, and I can subdue demons; but Je'Rol is half human. Dispirit only works on the demon side." She lowered her voice, her tone that of someone thinking out loud. "If the human side gains control, that may weaken my power over the demon side. That was unanticipated. I've never used dispirit on a half-blood more than two days. But I am testing the demon side to maintain control."

"You keep him subdued or I'll report this to the *Sect du Maistri Te'Mea*."

A long pause followed, and he imagined Liandra carefully concocting her reply. If he understood correctly, she'd committed an error that might have blasphemed the teachings of her precious founding teacher, Te'Mea. Amusement tugged at the corners of his mouth, despite the implications of giving in to the demon side.

"You would do no better for holding a fugitive half-blood, a crime against all clan laws." Smugness hung thick in her voice.

"The Ur'Asu allowed it." The stomp of heavy steps faded quickly.

Liandra mumbled something under her breath and returned to the cave. After some movement, she quieted, her heartbeat rapid. Lord Bannon had upset her, despite her trying to hide it. She was good at acting.

But Je'Rol was better. He let out a small sigh and waited for morning. Falling asleep would be preferable, but unlikely with this new information playing in his head.

\* \* \*

"Wake now, Je'Rol." Liandra's warm breath blew on his neck.

He'd been waiting for that command for a while, listening and pretending to sleep. He didn't know how much of the spell the woman last night had broken, but she'd indicated the time would come when he would be free. He'd rather act now, but he didn't have a chance of surviving. He had to wait, and to keep his demon side under tight control.

"Sit up and eat."

The sorceress could crawl back under whatever rock had hidden her. Unfortunately, that wasn't likely to happen.

He let out a low growl and sat up. She slid a plate to him covered in food, mostly meat and bread. If they intended him to be strong to fight, that explained the half-decent meals rather than starving him to weaken him, as he would have expected with being taken as a prisoner.

"Eat up, if you want to keep your strength." A wry smile curved up her face. Apparently satisfied that she had him, she stood and backed out of the cavern.

He gazed past her at the Li'Ador still standing watch, the only reason she could leave him alone without worrying about him escaping. Beyond their line, the sun slanted through the trees, leaving shadows across the men eating and chatting about Dev Nadir. A light breeze rustled tree leaves and brought a hint of the scent of rain.

Liandra disappeared from sight, but the Li'Ador seemed more attentive in exchange.

Je'Rol snarled at the emotionless faces fixed on the cave entrance only a couple strides away, weapons poised to threaten him. Without them, he might have escaped, magic or not.

The desire to live overrode his need for freedom, for the time. He tore at the cold meat, trying not to taste it.

After he finished, he stepped out of the cavern. Half a dozen Li'Ador staffs and arrows trained on him. It shouldn't matter with the speed of a demonlord at his disposal. The urge to fight extended his claws and bent his legs into a position to spring above them. He couldn't take them all on, but he could escape.

From somewhere behind, the golden head of the lady emerged. Her liquid amber eyes bore into him, and she shook her head minutely, loose waves of golden hair shimmering in the morning sun.

Confused after yesterday's reprimand, he relaxed the tightening of his legs and frowned, but she turned away to Lord Bannon, who bowed to her with his arm extended to the open carriage door.

A second later, fire flared in Je'Rol's chest. It burned away any lingering intentions of escape, searing his lungs so each breath hurt and he could only gasp. He fell to his hands and knees, trembling.

Amid the blur of his vision, the sorceress's face hovered close.

"Follow me," she said.

The fire lessened but did not cool. He stood and obeyed. Only when he entered the carriage did the fire vanish from his chest, leaving him to breathe deeply.

Liandra sat opposite him and let out a heavy sigh. "Why must you even consider it? You are mine, Je'Rol."

He pulled his hood down and crossed his arms. She could believe all she wanted about owning him or possessing his will; but someone had broken her spell, and he would bet good money it was the lady. The golden lady had to be demonlord for a human to show such deference

and to be able to weaken a sorcerer's magic, but if she was, she was far from her clan's domain. He'd never seen any like her in his life.

Who was she and why would she help him? The demonlords wanted him dead.

Next time she visited to break more of Liandra's spell, which she had promised, he would ask her.

## Chapter 4

Although Je'Rol did all he could to ignore the sorceress, by the time they reached the fields surrounding the harbor city of Dev Nadir, he sat with his claws grown long enough to mutilate her if she taunted him one more time. He'd sworn he wouldn't give in to her teasing, to leave his human side dominant, but *Serae* Liandra had ways of irritating him into losing his temper.

He would never get close to killing her, but he could cause some serious harm before she brought that magic to bear.

"You will obey my every word, Je'Rol," she said over the creak and clatter of the carriage and the horses and their tack. The soldiers rode without speaking, but they'd said enough last night for him to understand their purpose.

The land smelled different here, and soon he'd pick up the fishy scent from the ocean not far away. Lord Bannon must have lived on the edge of the Tundars Mountains. It should've taken longer to cross, particularly since a good part of that continent—shared by several demonlord clans—was mountains. He'd been further into the mountains when the sorceress caught him; they must have moved him a long ways before he'd awakened in her lair of Lord Bannon's palace.

Outside the windows, human adults worked in the fields alongside their children. While the men drove the horses pulling the cutting blades, several boys hurried to bundle the grain and run them to the nearest ring of women and girls, who separated the chafe from the grain.

The demonlords owned all the lands but were rarely seen. As long as the humans compensated the ruling clan with livestock fattened on their lands, the demonlords mostly left them alone. Humans were cheap labor for them. They used to be food, but that ended long ago, when the demonlords discovered their usefulness in many other ways.

His mother had been used to satisfy one demonlord's lust.

Je'Rol flexed his claws and stared at the results of that lust. He should never have been allowed to live. Somehow, his mother had hidden him from the demon hunters for fifteen years. The boys taunting him had been one thing, but he wasn't sorry that he lost control. Throwing rocks at him and kicking him were no worse than him attacking them in self-defense, even if he couldn't remember doing it.

It was the mutilation of his first true victim that brought the demon hunters after him. The boys had seen nothing compared to that.

Those same claws had slashed the body to bloody shreds, and the beast had fed. Now the humans wanted him to fight on their terms, to use that violence for their entertainment.

Je'Rol snarled and slashed at the side of the carriage, leaving deep gouges in the woodwork.

"Be still!" the sorceress snapped.

He turned to her, teeth bared and lengthening and a deep rumble emanating from his throat. She wanted him to fight for Lord Bannon, and the only way to fight effectively was to let loose the beast. Four days ago, he had been free. *Serae* Liandra had taken that from him, and now he had been cooped up for three days, unable to stretch his legs or seek the solace of being alone. More than any time in his life, he wanted to release the beast from inside.

"You will have your chance," she said in a silken voice.

Waiting wasn't an option. He jumped at her.

And seemed to have landed in a fire. Barely aware of his surroundings and the cloaked figure no longer where he expected it, he gasped for air and stumbled to the floor of the carriage.

"You cannot hurt me." Her voice soothed, although her words taunted. "Sit up, Je'Rol, and relax..."

The fire eased but only faded completely after he reclaimed the seat across from the sorceress. Covered in a layer of sweat that stuck his shirt to him, Je'Rol caught his breath.

"Conserve your strength. Soon, you won't be restrained, but you must never harm me, Je'Rol."

"Why? Because it would free me?"

The smile on her face hinted of dark satisfaction. "Far from it."

He raised his hand and extended the claws in threat; but, as he expected, she showed no fear. Rather, amusement danced in her eyes, which looked out the window a moment later.

He could take her unawares if she relaxed. He should have tried last night, except he wouldn't have gone far with the Li'Ador right outside the cave. Maybe her power over him wasn't something she consciously exuded only while awake.

His fingers curled into a fist, the claws shrinking to normal nails again.

The demonlord lady better know what she was doing, if she'd done anything. He'd gained no advantage on the sorceress.

The carriage soon came to a stop with men on horses surrounding them. The scent of horse sweat and dirty humans blowing in through the windows overwhelmed him.

The door opened and an armored soldier gave him a long look before turning to her. "*Serae* Liandra. Lord Bannon wishes to know before we enter the city that you have the..." He hesitated, his eyes sizing up Je'Rol and the hood shadowing his face. "The half-blood under control."

"You can assure Lord Bannon that the half-blood will restrain himself. He won't hurt anyone."

The soldier gave a sharp nod of his head and shut the door.

Je'Rol crossed his arms and closed his eyes, cutting off the world and the harsh realities.

Except for a woman's voice he picked out among the squeaks and creaks of armor and leather and occasional clink of metal and horse's blowing or stomping. She spoke not in the common speech of the humans, but in the Lexic of the demonlords.

He understood nothing, except the tone. A man, likely one of the bear clan, was firm and sharp, allowing no argument; but the woman was also firm, and questioning in tone. They paused and the man yelled out, "Let them pass!"

Once again, the carriage creaked and bounced along the road.

Je'Rol peered out the window and caught the eyes of a man in meticulously detailed plated armor, his black hair pulled from the hard, angular lines of his face into a ponytail near the top of his head. His horse chomped its bit as they rolled past.

"He seems dissatisfied." Liandra sounded amused. "I suppose he should be to smell a half-blood in his presence. The Ur'Asu are less forgiving than the Su'Kora or the Je'Gri, of breaking sacred laws." She stroked something in the palm of her hand, her eyes dropping to reflect a green glow. "You should be glad I found you when I did."

He met her eyes with a glare and a low growl. He would have been just as well off without her "protection" from the demonlord laws, which was odd considering the demonlords ruled and answered to no human; or were they amused by his being forced to fight to his death in the Dao Larashi?

What had the golden lady told the guard about him? How had she convinced the bear clan to let him pass?

Next time she came to break the sorceress's spell, he'd ask.

In the meantime, he could do nothing but watch the city roll past.

Je'Rol noticed the smell first, a foulness blending with the sweat of horses and men. Every city bore the stench from too many humans living in cramped conditions, their waste and excrement flushed through streets or—as in some of the more prosperous cities—through underground tunnels. Dev Nadir was in the latter category, but that didn't mean people didn't throw waste into the streets.

City doors thundered a grinding welcome. He peaked out the corner of his eyes through the window of the carriage at the massive gateway and its immense wall. Like most cities, they were well defended against natters or invaders.

The carriages and their entourage entered the city outskirts, where the homes were larger and farther between with great swaths of open land sloping down to the heart of the city and the harbor. The tallest buildings of stone and masonry near the harbor stood level with the modest homes on the higher elevation on the outskirts.

Not just any buildings stood level but three towers overlooking the harbor and the city. Similar towers stood sentinel at regular spacing along the miles of wall surrounding it all.

Dev Nadir was no ordinary city, but he'd seen more impressive cities.

Still, there was one sight he had heard about worth noting.

Je'Rol turned for a better look of an enormous structure below, an oval of descending tiers to a flat field on the inside. From a distance, it could have been small, but wide lanes radiated like spokes of a wheel from it with dots of movement around it in those spokes. It dwarfed the other structures, even the giant statues, around it.

The carriage turned on the sloping rode so he could see nothing but the few homes and the long stone wall on the outskirts.

The one time he'd been to Dev Nadir had been in landing in the harbor, and he had immediately made for the outskirts and jumped the height of the wall. Demonlord abilities gave him another advantage—he didn't have to pass through the normal checkpoints.

Je'Rol closed his eyes for a while and listened to the sounds around him, mostly the clap of hundreds of horses' hooves on hard-packed dirt. He tried to avoid noticing too much of the myriad scents, although he thought he caught a whiff of flowers. It passed before he could be sure.

On they traveled, down the sloping road. Where it leveled, the clop of hooves turned into loud claps on stone.

He opened his eyes and glanced out. The structures here were taller and more ornate, but the streets more crowded. The thick mass of mounted soldiers had vanished from each side of the carriage. He could only guess they had formed up ahead and behind. People in the streets stood and watched with curiosity painted across their faces. Some leaned against pillars supporting awnings or balconies, their arms crossed and faces pinched as if inconvenienced or unwilling to let any sense of curiosity show.

That would change when he was ordered to fight. The Dao Larashi was a popular sport, originally enjoyed by the demonlords, who watched their human animals fight, sometimes throwing them against particularly vicious natters. That had changed somewhere along the lines,

as most demonlords retreated from the increasingly crowded cities. Je'Rol sympathized—humans stank.

The largest arena, the Kairashun, was a wonder among the feats of human engineering. Other arenas had been designed by the demonlords, who forced the humans to labor to build them, but the Kairashun was a monument of human ingenuity to imitate their masters and expand on what had come before. He'd heard of it before ever setting foot in Dev Nadir, but he'd avoided the city and its residents as much as possible, pausing only long enough to gather information for his search and be on his way.

They turned along a street parallel to the central city, giving him a clear view once more of the Kairashun and the banners waving in a stiff breeze around the edge of its bowl. He'd get a better look soon enough. The humans would force him to fight there; the humans who imitated their masters, seeking to become them.

Liandra watched him, a satisfied lift to the corners of her mouth.

Je'Rol looked away, studying the city layout while he could. He would need the information when the time came to escape.

They passed into one of the spokes of the wheel where the Kairashun was the hub. Mounted soldiers once more formed lines around them, blocking his view.

It didn't matter. He'd find his way out, one way or another, after the sorceress's spell was broken and the Li'Ador were gone, or when most of them were.

With the windows blocked of the breeze carrying the city smells—good and bad—the sweet musky scent of the sorceress closed around him with the stench of dirty humans.

He glared at the sorceress from under his cowl, but she simply gave a sickening smile, her dark eyes hinting of reproach.

After some time, they rode under the archway of the Kairashun entrance, the interior of the carriage darkening as they passed into a livery, based on the overwhelming odor of livestock and their waste.

There the carriage stopped and most of the soldiers dismounted in a clamor of armor and tack. The door of the carriage opened to a semi-circle of Li'Ador spears. Once again, he stepped out, but this time a ceiling stopped any thoughts of jumping clear. In the tight space of what appeared to be an entrance tunnel, he had no room to maneuver. If he dared to fight his way out, he'd likely be skewered.

Je'Rol stepped down with the sorceress following.

"Bring him," a deep voice commanded.

The Li'Ador opened a path to an archway under which Lord Bannon and the golden lady stood, her simple amber gown clung like a second skin on her slim figure. Only the frightening beauty of the demonlords could turn ordinary into extraordinary. No matter how much they tried, the humans would never achieve the same effect with their hands as the demonlords did with their magic.

"Follow Lord Bannon," Liandra whispered.

The closing of the Li'Ador behind him gave Je'Rol no choice but to obey. They moved with him through a dingy corridor slanting beneath the main arena. In those torchlit stone passages, they passed sections housing dozens of horses and other animals. Caretakers backed into their nooks as the entourage passed. After local guards unlocked several gateways, they entered an area of men chained behind bars, most of them in their own cells and all of them well-fed and sturdy. The clink of chains accompanied their movements.

They stank, like the rest of the closed-in underground corridor. But it was nothing compared to what stopped Je'Rol from continuing.

The reek of blood and death drifted from ahead, the stench of demons, more specifically, natters.

"Keep moving."

A sharp prod in the back triggered an explosion of defense and a growl that filled the narrow corridor. He whirled and knocked the staff away, but in reaching for the man who poked him, several points stabbed into him. Je'Rol roared and whirled to knock them away, but the soldiers backed off.

Tense silence surrounded him. They feared the blood rage, but how many knew the sorceress had silenced the demon side?

He glared at the men wearing the silver-accented black uniforms, daring them to force him to fight. They pointed their spears and kept their distance. After a dark look to each, he turned and continued with the others nearer to the natters, blood oozing from the fresh wounds cool on his sides. They would heal in a day.

Whispers trailed around him from the men behind bars, questioning his status as an opponent. They'd witnessed the speed at which he moved—unnatural for a human—and heard the beastly roar.

The clamor of natters behind sealed doors rose up in earnest, the clinking of chains muffled by what must have been inches of solid metal and stone. The entourage stopped before a metal door blocking the rest of the corridor, an open cell to their right. The last cell before the natters section would be his.

Je'Rol stepped past the golden lady and Lord Bannon into a room of stone. Shackles secured to chains above a wooden bench along the back wall. The Li'Ador stepped forward to secure his wrists in the heavy bindings. He almost laughed in their faces that they expected it to hold him; but the moment they slapped the bands around his wrists, his strength waned.

He lifted his arms, which weighed ten times heavier than a second ago, as the Li'Ador stepped back. He could barely reach up, much less fight his way free. Such cuffs weakened him to be less than a human. Curse them all!

"He won't escape." A man in the dark blue tunic of the local soldiers stopped at the cross bars of the cell door.

"You have no idea what I have here," Lord Bannon said.

Liandra's fingers traced the symbols around the cuffs, a smile sliding up her face. "Powerful magic." Apparently satisfied with his incapacity to escape, she stepped back outside with the others.

"Well?" Lord Bannon questioned.

"We can leave him. He'll go nowhere, my lord."

"You're certain?"

Her lips curved up into a sly smile. "Yes."

Lord Bannon turned to the golden lady, who gave a bow of her head. That seemed to satisfy him. "I want no less than two Li'Ador here at all times, rotated throughout the day and night."

"Understood." The nearest soldier gave a crisp nod and motioned to two of his men to take up positions.

The local soldier grunted. "As you wish. Unnecessary, but you're payin 'em."

"I'll protect my investment."

Je'Rol caught a glance from the golden lady before they left and he staggered back to the bench to sit, his body feeling like a ton of bricks. Two Li'Ador stayed behind, both in the middle of the corridor facing the direction they had come. If not for the magic restraining him, he might take them on. Any ordinary shackles he could have broken with little effort.

He hadn't anticipated magic. But the magic only weakened him. It didn't dull his senses.

The natters reeked nearby, despite the heavy door closing them off from escape. The humans were no better. The filth of the underground prison overwhelmed him, and likely did the same to the golden lady, except she didn't have to stay in the intolerable stench.

After the long carriage ride with no chance to stretch his legs, the need to move had coiled inside him, latched by the sorceress's commands and now by the magic of the shackles.

He stood and gathered that strength and pulled on the chains. The Li'Ador soldiers watched him, their weapons ready. His muscles strained against the weight of the chains with each pull forward, his legs adding their force to free him.

The cuffs cut into his forearms, but he didn't care. Je'Rol grunted with the exertion, sweat beading on his brow and sticking his clothes to him.

The Li'Ador stood ready.

Je'Rol continued for some time, until the warden came with a scrawny boy in a plain tunic. The tousle-haired boy carried a plate loaded with food.

A key clinked in the lock of the cell door. "Ain't no use tryin to break magic-bound shackles. Not even them natters escape." He opened the door and prodded the boy to take the plate in.

Je'Rol waited for the boy to leave, which he hurried to do after setting the plate on the floor close to Je'Rol.

"Eat up."

"Maybe I'm not hungry."

The warden shrugged and locked the door. "Not my concern." He prodded the boy away ahead of him and disappeared.

Je'Rol's stomach growled. Hunger stretched his foot to hook the plate and slide it into reach of his hands. What he told the warden had been a lie of defiance; in truth he wouldn't give up a solid meal when he needed his strength more than ever. Soon he would fight for more than their entertainment.

## Chapter 5

The burning on his chest alerted him to the dark shape next to where he slept on the floor. In the green glow caught beneath her hood, he made out the hard lines of the golden lady's face.

"Hold still," she whispered, her hand pressed against his chest.

He did as she commanded, in spite of the fire burning through his body.

After some time, she sat back, and the fire faded with the green glow.

"This is strong magic," she said in a low voice. "Arcane. The sorcerers have grown too powerful."

He didn't care what kind of magic it was, only that she could break it.

The demonlord turned to him, the light of the torch in the quiet corridor catching part of her face and adding an orange glow to the pallor of her fair skin. "I'll need more time to weaken it. The spell grew strong again..." Her eyes dropped, unfocused.

"How?"

"Exposure to the sorceress, I expect."

But Liandra had left him, apparently satisfied that he couldn't escape. If the demonlord was right, Liandra was also sure that she had strengthened the spell binding him.

"The cuffs are another matter."

He lifted his hand, and strained to do so, aware of the clink of the chain. They still weakened him. "You can't break their magic?"

"Not now. I haven't the time." She glanced towards the open door of his cell. The Li'Ador soldiers lay crumpled on the ground. "The change of guards will wake them. I'll return tomorrow night, but you must obey the sorceress. Give her no reason to stay by you."

She rose to her feet, again glancing furtively towards the cell door.

"Wait." Too loud. She cringed. Je'Rol listened for any signs of movement and heard only the patter of rodent feet nearby. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Why are you helping me?"

After a few seconds, she said, "I could not live with myself if I didn't try."

"Why?"

"I haven't time to explain, but can say that the Su'Kora believe as Je'Dron does, that all demonlords can work together with humans. You represent not only the rightful ruler of the Je'Gri, but the ideals he and his allies value."

The ideals Je'Dron and his allies valued? What ideals—raping human women and forcing them to watch their children slaughtered because of what they could become?

She strode for the gate and closed it, turning the key in the lock where she had left it hanging.

He let out a low growl of frustration. "That's it?"

She pulled the key with the clink of metal. "A terrible war is coming. These humans have grown too powerful and the demonlords won't tolerate it."

"What can I do?"

She glanced down the corridor. "Hope," she said and hurried away.

Hope. For what—freedom? That the humans lost? That the demonlords gave up?

The humans had grown too powerful. He agreed with that assessment but could not argue against the reasons for the humans' revolt. Demonlords had once used humans for sport and as their main courses. It was only fair for the humans to turn that around on the ones who once hunted them.

He was nothing to either of them.

Je'Rol shivered and rolled over, the clinking of his chains shattering the silence.

If the Adepts of Te'Mea found the power to confront the demonlords as equals, the war would be bloody for both sides. Both sides would be matched in power, but not in numbers. The demonlords still far outnumbered the demon hunters, but not the total population of humans. If the humans could hold a half-blood against his will, they might have the power to hold demonlords also. Get enough sorcerers together and they could secure the demonlords for the demon hunters to kill at their leisure.

Maybe the demonlords deserved what they had coming, but they had guided humans into civilizations and a cohesive society that could work together and create wonders equal to them.

Let them do as they would, destroy each other for all he cared. Neither side cared for him.

Forget it. He'd fight his way to freedom and be gone, out of sight and once more alone to wander a world that considered him an abomination—too weak for the demonlords yet too strong and unstable for the humans.

Sleep came from the fatigue of the cuff magic.

\* \* \*

Je'Rol awoke to the slam of the cell door and a plate of food within his reach.

"Eat up," the warden barked, his keys rattling in the lock. "You'll need your strength."

Je'Rol let out a growl and the man stepped back from the crossed bars. The warden's mumbles about dangerous half-bloods deserving to be killed and looking forward to the champion defeating him reached Je'Rol. He's heard it all before, but this time anticipated the fight and taking down, if not killing, whatever "champion" challenged him.

Only one concern weighed on his mind—that they intended him to fight wearing the cursed cuffs, thereby weakening him and allowing Lord Chandroya's precious champion to handily defeat him.

If he could unleash the beast, not even the cuffs could stop him, or so he hoped. If they could restrain natters, the cuffs might have the power to restrain his demon side.

He'd find out soon enough.

Je'Rol choked down the plateful of food, wiping up the last of the meat juices with the last of the loaf. Afterwards, he shoved the plate aside. Satisfied with the fullness in his belly, he sat back on the bench and closed his eyes, listening to the chatter of guards and the scratching and snarling of the natters in the section next to him.

Among the tangle of scents floating through the stuffed air of his prison, an odd one reached him. Je'Rol pulled to the end of his chains and sniffed, seeking the faint hint of something different than the reek of men and horses and natters and filth.

He sniffed again, wondering if he had been mistaken.

He hadn't. There it was, a scent he rarely caught, but he knew it—half-blood.

Another one.

He should have noticed sooner, but the commotion when they brought him in had distracted him, and he hadn't cared in his struggle with the cuffs. Unless the other half-blood had been brought in while he slept.

Whatever the case, he might find himself fighting another man or woman as strong as himself—not exactly inspiring for escape—unless he could convince the other to join him in

escape instead of fighting him. That could work. Liandra couldn't possibly control them both at once.

But she could still control *him*. The demonlord had been unsuccessful breaking the spell.

Surely she would return again.

Je'Rol hoped she would return.

\* \* \*

The golden lady didn't return that night, but she did return the night before the scheduled grand entrance of the Dao Larashi.

He awoke to the burning on his chest again.

"Shh!" The green glow highlighted harsh lines of concentration on her human face.

Je'Rol breathed deeply and, by concentrating on the odors, forced his mind from the pain flaring through him. Her clean scent came to him with a clarity that cut through the stench of the holding area. Light and soft, a spring breeze whispering of meadow flowers and open lands, it might have been only a dream. He remembered that dream of freedom.

The fire cooled with the fading of the green glow.

"It's all I can do. The sorceress is stronger than I expected." Wincing, she put a hand to her forehead and sat back.

He sat up with the intent of helping her, but the fatigue of the cuffs slowed him.

She put a hand up to stop him. "I'll be all right."

He waited with respect to her, his ears open for the alert of the guards; but once again, the Li'Ador lay crumpled in the aisle outside his cell.

"Are they all asleep?"

"Yes."

"What of the other half-blood?"

A wan smile touched lips outlined in the torchlight shining through the bars. "So, you're aware of him. Yes, he sleeps."

"Will they make us fight each other?"

Her smile faded into the shadows. "I don't know their plans. Lord Chandroya has advertised a half-blood fight, but nothing about you against each other. It would be an unfair fight—you against a boy. I believe he has other plans for each of you."

"A boy?" Rage fired through him at the thought. They would send a boy to fight?

"Not yet a man but close—twelve I believe he advertised."

"He's a child!" Je'Rol caught himself, but the anger roared through him, stirring the beast. Who would put a child to fight men? In the right circumstances, even Je'Rol could be killed by men, but a child had less advantage.

"Hush!" The demonlord rose to her feet. "You would wake them all."

He clamped his jaw and glanced aside, avoiding her reprimand but accepting that she was right. As a full demonlord, she should have had greater power; perhaps they weren't as skilled in magic as he had assumed.

"I'll do what I can to finish the task, but I'm already too weak." She stepped to the open door.

Another concern rose to the forefront, something he'd considered asking her since her last visit, after he confirmed she was demonlord. "One more question."

She stood at the door and turned to him.

"What do you know of the obelisk of Mai'Kari?"

Her head lowered and her hand twisted around the bar of the cell door. "Ancient magic must remain hidden, Je'Rol. The obelisk would ruin our world. Why would you seek such an object?"

Her condemning tone gave him hesitation, but he had to know. "I was told it would give me absolute control over the demon side."

"It would give you control...over all demons." In the silence of the section, her breath blew like the roar of a wind. "In the days of the clan wars, it was created by the Mai'Ekam using deciphered magic of the Master Race to dominate the other clans. It was taken by the humans, until a half-blood killed the one bearing it. That is why the clans hid it and erased all clues to its location. You must not seek this, Je'Rol. I won't return to you if that is your goal, no matter my loyalty to Je'Dron."

Her words stabbed his spirit like a knife in his back. She knew but she would deny him his right to live free of the monster within him, the monster Je'Dron himself cursed him to bear. "Then there is no hope to contain it."

"None I know. Je'Dron spared your life; do not betray him." She slipped from the cell and locked the door. "Swear to me you'll forget the obelisk."

He couldn't. What she asked was to give up and die. He might as well if he gave up his search, because he would never find peace.

"Swear it, or you won't see me again."

He sat down, unable to obey her but not wanting to have to obey the sorceress any longer. The lie on his tongue stung and refused to voice itself. Instead, he bit it, letting the silence speak for him.

She flipped up the hood of her golden cloak and whirled away. The soft patter of her feet faded.

He should not have asked her, but he had to know. Long ago, he had met an old man at a tavern who had recognized the demonlord in his youthful features; the man had told him it could help. In his quest, Je'Rol had found no evidence or history of the obelisk but his desire for control had driven him onward. Now he understood why—the demonlords had hidden it and erased all traces of its existence—but it was real. One of the clans must have known where it was.

The Mai'Ekam clan had disappeared long ago, passed into legends. In his search, he'd heard rumors of their grand creations, but he'd found nothing. Now, he knew they had existed, but something must have destroyed them.

If they could render something as powerful as the obelisk, what else might be hiding? Where was their domain?

More than ever, he wanted to find them. He had to escape that prison and seek the burial place of the Mai'Ekam, if not also the obelisk. All their secrets seemed to have been buried with them, but he would find them, or die trying.

He wouldn't be going anywhere until they removed the cuffs, if they removed the cuffs to let him fight.

Je'Rol let out a soft growl and laid flat on his back on the hard ground. He needed his rest; tomorrow would be interesting.

## Chapter 6

The noise of the crowds faintly reached him through the stone, the occasional trumpet blaring a deep salvo of irritation to his keen ears. The fighting hadn't even started, but he could guess there was entertainment throughout the day.

The fighting didn't start until after midday or at least after the second meal of the day, which should have been around midday, perhaps beyond that. Then periods of commotion in which soldiers escorted fighters in and out disturbed Je'Rol's occasions of peace, what little he found with the natters disturbed by the ruckus above and adding their own discordant chorus.

Several days passed, and he welcomed the periods of quiet.

The golden lady never returned.

But the sorceress did. He didn't see her face through the shadows of her hood where she stopped outside his cell, but he recognized the lithe movements and the smell.

From the bench where he sat, Je'Rol growled the moment he recognized who she was, but it was a low growl masked by the commotion of the natters.

The guard unlocked the door and stepped aside for her.

"I'll be all right. You may return to your post." Although she directed her seductive voice to the guard, it reached deep into Je'Rol's spirit and sparked defiance.

The guard gave her a doubting look.

"He's no challenge to me. Go now."

After a few seconds, he disappeared, and Liandra stepped inside, her full lips pouting. "How neglectful I've been, leaving you alone all these days." She spoke as if regretful of wronging a lover, but the only regret Je'Rol expected from her was not being able to taunt him.

He scowled at her, refusing to play her game; and the demonlord had warned him that something in her presence strengthened the spell. If he didn't have the golden lady's help, he couldn't afford to risk Liandra's power over him deepening once more. He had to stay calm, no matter how she grated his patience.

In her slippers peeking out from beneath her cloak, Liandra stopped just out of his reach, if he pulled to the ends of his chains. "How are you?" She spoke as if she sympathized with him.

He wouldn't fall for that. "What do you care?"

She clicked her tongue. "My poor boy. I care very much. I'm here; am I not? I came to see you after all this time."

And he should believe she came out of the goodness of her heart? The woman didn't have a heart, he'd bet. "What do you want, sorceress?" he growled.

"Only to know that you're treated well. Lord Bannon has bet good money on you, so you must win...at all costs. He would not let anyone sabotage his investment...my investment." The last two words purred off her tongue.

He should have expected that, but no grown men dared enter his cell. They had to force a helpless boy to bring his food, a young man he had no intention of hurting. Attacking anyone would only hinder his efforts, and likely mean no food, not that what they provided was enough. On his own, he would gladly eat twice the amount. What they fed likely satisfied the human men, but he wasn't purely human.

"You're not weak or injured?"

"No."

She paused and stepped closer, and leaned over so her warm breath blew against his cheek. "We heard someone has been in here."

"Lots of people have been in here."

Her eyebrow arched up. "Several guards were found asleep some nights ago and one other night since we arrived. Have you seen anything, Je'Rol?"

"No one."

She straightened, a hint of suspicion playing across the shadowed features beneath her cowl.

"I was sleeping!" He clenched his claws around the bench to restrain himself from sinking them into her soft flesh.

"But you feel well?"

"As well as I can with magic enslaving me and locked in a cage with so little to eat and none of my freedom." Claws extended, piercing the wood on which he sat.

She backed off, a rueful smile playing on her lips. "Very well. Good night, Je'Rol," she whispered and slipped out the cell door. A few seconds later, the jangle of keys announced the arrival of the guard, who locked the door.

Good riddance. He hoped the sorceress's presence had not renewed the magic binding him through the stone implanted on his chest. If it was weak enough from the help of the golden lady, he might be able to break it himself.

He wouldn't know until he tried to escape, if he could resist Liandra and escape from whatever challenge they put before him to fight; and he imagined the worst. Surviving was his first priority, escape his second.

A low growl rumbled from his throat as he glared at the Li'Ador in the corridor outside his cell. He'd have to work fast at the precisely right moment to escape, but he'd need the cuffs removed if he would have any hope of that happening.

Breaking the sorceress's spell would mean nothing if he didn't get out of those cuffs. He'd need his full power.

That meant relaxing and doing nothing to resist the magic of the cuffs or to arouse the guards outside. He'd learned that much in his wanderings—keep your head down and your mouth shut to avoid trouble.

He did that for three more days, the boy who brought his food showing more bravery at each feeding. The Li'Ador never wavered in their attention, but they rotated frequently.

Two nights later, he awoke to soft hands on his face and the faint scent of clear air among the filth of the prison.

"Wake, Je'Rol," someone whispered.

He blinked his eyes open and stared in surprise at the figure with golden hair beneath the tailored cloak. "Who are you?"

A smile played on those fair features in the flickering torchlight. "Someone who would rather see you out of Lord Bannon's hands."

"You didn't answer my question."

She dropped her eyes and took a deep breath. "I would not have you forced to give that name to the sorceress. If they knew I was here, my work would be at risk."

"She suspects already, my lady. No one else could leave all the men sleeping."

The demonlord met his eyes, a flash of horror across her face measured a moment later. "Of course, but there are many other demonlords in the city in recent days. They haven't given up

their thrill of humans killing one another...and the bodies have been carted from the city for their feasts."

Disgusting. Je'Rol snorted at the prospects. "The demonlords haven't given up their taste for humans."

"No."

"What of you?"

Her eyes caught the firelight with a hungry glint, or it might have been something else. He couldn't be sure.

"The Ur'Asu invited nobles from all the clans to the Dao Larashi tournament. I believe they're using it as a means to revive the old ways. They pushed Lord Chandroya to this tournament. Lord Ur'Makus put up the purse for the winning owner."

"But you didn't answer my question." And he suspected why.

She stood and took a step away. After a few seconds she turned, her back to the light from the corridor and her face shadowed from the cowl. "I am an ambassador of the Su'Kora. I was invited to the Dao Larashi by the Ur'Asu, and whatever social occasions they offer."

"You're no better than the other demons." The words ground out in a deep snarl, his fists clenched to restrain the beast and his disgust.

"It was our way long ago that humans were among many creatures we hunted. Their bodies are wasted with burning."

"Excuses," he grumbled. That's all he heard. She was no better than the clans who never denied their tastes for humans.

"I've made no excuses. You should not ask questions for which you don't want to know answers." Her tone might have struck him like a whip.

Je'Rol winced but she'd confirmed what he suspected—she'd also retained her taste for human meat. "Why are you here this time? I thought you disagreed with my search."

"I do." She paused, taking a moment to glance out at the sleeping Li'Ador. Silence closed in on them; not even the natters dared rise, but their voices had decreased over the last two days, likely many of them having been killed by the human warriors fighting for their lives.

In a lowered voice, she said, "But I've heard troubling rumors from other domains." She hesitated and knelt at his side. "The stakes are higher than you and me, but I must stay here. You must escape, Je'Rol."

He'd gladly escape any time, if someone would remove the cuffs.

She started to reach for them and hesitated with her hand inches away. "I can't touch them any more than you. That's part of the problem. It seems the sorcerers are finding new ways to bind demon powers. Some of us suspect they may have deciphered the secrets of the Master Race. Others think the power may already lie dormant in the humans, and that power is activated by something, which has given rise to the Adepts of Te'Mea."

He sat up, the clink of the chains ringing in his cell.

"You must find the obelisk...and destroy it."

Destroy it, his only chance of gaining control over the demon side of himself? "Why should I destroy it?"

"Because if you don't, the blood of humans and demons will be on your hands. The demonlords have spoken of slaughtering the humans to stop them before they can rise against the clans. But if the obelisk is out there, the clans will turn on each other for control of it; the humans would fare no better. Its destruction could save this world."

If the humans gained power over their former masters, the demonlords would be justly punished for their crimes. He took a perverse pleasure in that idea. But he didn't like the thought of the Adepts playing with the power of the extinct beings known as the Master Race.

Aside from that, the humans aspired to become like the demonlords and sacrificed their own kind for sport, as the Dao Larashi tournament proved.

Either the demonlords gained the obelisk's power and controlled one another and killed the humans, or the humans used the power to purge the world of demons, but the Adepts of Te'Mea would be no better than their former demonlord masters. Humans had already proven they would make war on one another for power many times, showing that their hearts were no better than the demonlords they wished to conquer.

Je'Rol didn't want to care about anyone except himself. He wanted the obelisk's power to control his own demon side. Only then would he find peace.

"Destroy the obelisk," she said.

"If I find it, I'll consider it." Consider and reject the notion.

"Consider it carefully." She rose again and strode to the cell door. "I've weakened the spell as much as I dare without arousing the sorceress's suspicions."

He reached down and felt something where his hands could not before touch—the rough scabbing around the stone on his chest.

The squeak of the cell door and the clank of the keys jerked his eyes up to the demonlord. After a pause at the locked door, she hurried from sight.

While he couldn't agree with her partaking of the demonlord feasts, she demonstrated a deeper concern for more than herself. The Su'Kora ambassador was a noble woman who couldn't help what she was. The demonlords were, after all, predators who took the form of humans to camouflage themselves among what had for much of their history been their main prey. He had assumed most of them had given up the taste of human flesh.

The Dao Larashi was an excuse for their fine dining.

Je'Rol shuddered and lay down on the hard ground. Soon he would fight, and he would break the final thin strand of the sorceress's spell.

He didn't want to consider the numbers of demonlords who might be ready to attack when he made his escape.

\* \* \*

The next day, the same noise disturbed the air of the prison. Somewhere in the midst of it, a cluster of Li'Ador appeared outside his cell with the sorceress. The warden jangled the keys and unlocked the door.

"It's time." Liandra glided through the door past the husky man, a Dev Nadir soldier right behind her.

Je'Rol glared at them, glad to see the hesitation in the man's movements as he approached with keys. It appeared they would remove the cuffs. With those off, he could make his move.

Liandra murmured in the strange language, and his surroundings darkened. She'd done it once before, along the journey there.

"Stand still, Je'Rol, and listen to me," she said.

Someone fiddled with his hands and a heaviness lifted from his body, as if he'd been carrying a burden so long he'd forgotten what it was like to be free of it. He stood upright, feeling as if he could sprint from the shadows around him before they thought to move.

"You will obey me," the sultry voice of the sorceress whispered from the shadow nearest to him.

He stood without his cloak and searched the dark face with the light marks of her tattoos. It was time to fight, and he was more than ready after being locked up without room to move. They had taken his freedom, but the energy and the need to move had built up, restrained only by the cuffs they had used to bind him.

The dull clank of metal resounded from behind him as shadows backed away.

Except the sorceress.

"Come, Je'Rol."

He followed her from the cell into the dim corridor. Behind bars, in dark alcoves, a few shadows stirred.

Behind him, the muffled tromp of boots followed. The Li'Ador closed in, blocking any retreat.

Ahead, Liandra led him through the arched corridor to a side tunnel sloping down. Down? Shouldn't they be going up to the arena?

Although the spell muted his senses, the scent of blood overwhelmed him. They were close.

They reached level ground before a set of tall double doors. Three shadows stood to either side.

"Open it," a deep voice ordered from somewhere behind him.

Je'Rol shook his head, but he knew he couldn't clear the darkness induced by the spell. Instincts had arisen to react without rational thought. His heart pounded in his chest and claws extended, as if he could fight his way out of the spell; it wasn't the spell but opponents bent on killing him that challenged him.

The darkness dissipated in a line between the doors, the muted sunlight washing through an ever increasing chasm of space that stopped at twice his width.

"Go, Je'Rol," the sorceress whispered from his right.

His feet moved forward, carrying him into the dim light of a large round enclosure surrounded by walls at least four times his height. Across the circle, the bloodied remains of a few natters lay strewn across the arena, along with what looked like the body of a goblin in fine garb torn and bloodied—likely tossed in by a demonlord unhappy with its service.

The roar of the crowd crescendoed with the brightening of the sun.

The doors boomed closed behind him and all senses awakened as if emerging from a heavy fog.

The Kairashun was enormous, and apparently dug out of the ground. He might be able to jump those walls to gain freedom, but it would be questionable. Whoever had designed the structure had done so with a sense of the abilities of demons.

Tiers of faces looked down from above, and if the golden lady had been right, demonlords blended in among them. If he jumped clear, he would have to contend with them.

Let them. He let out a low growl in threat, not caring that they would never hear over the thunder of voices.

Two other sets of doors stood closed at approximately the exact third spacing around the circle. He'd bet one of those led to the natters section. Maybe both did, depending on how much space it took beneath the spectators.

And the arena was full of spectators, whose voices hushed to a minimum.

From around the arc before him, five men in armor and helmets and bearing various weapons of brutal designs approached. These men had seen vicious battle already, judging by the dents in their armor and the blood splattered over them, but they'd faced nothing like him. He would show them what a true demon could do.

Claws extended fully with the rage of the beast hammering for release against the spell restraining it. With that in effect, he could maintain his control for this fight, possibly to escape. That was all he needed to let loose the true power of his demon side.

Too many days penned up charged through him like lightning. Je'Rol waited, watching every step the men took. One of them swung an axe every few steps, another brandished a spiked club in one hand with a couple of swords and knives strapped across his back and chest. Two of them dragged metal nets that clinked behind them. Another twirled a chain weapon not quite a mace but with spikes along the length of the end.

He'd bet those metal nets had barbs on them also.

Five men with human-made weapons and armor, and him with his claws and superhuman abilities; not an unfair fight. It was a challenge, but not one he couldn't overcome.

Je'Rol waited, the murmur of the crowd low now. An occasional cough or comment reached him, but even those decreased as his adversaries approached.

The men closed in, a few of them casting sideways glances to the others. The black-bearded man to his right held his axe steady in his hands. At the far left, a man with a net unsheathed a broadsword. The middle man motioned to the others. They stopped several strides from him, and the crowds hushed to nothing.

Je'Rol growled, the anticipation of the bloody fight coursing through his muscles and tightening them in preparation. Someone had to make the first move. He squatted in preparation to leap.

He'd have to move fast to avoid their weapons. If he let them surround him, he'd be trapped. And his claws wouldn't do more than scratch their armor. He'd have to strike for the weak points—under their arms and along their necks and legs. Yes, the legs, low but vulnerable. They only protected their heads and bodies, the vital organs, but the extremities were left unprotected, or most of them were. The men wore shin guards and bracers and shoulder plates, allowing them the flexibility and lightness to move while protecting the most vulnerable areas.

He knew his targets of soft flesh, but getting in and getting out before they brought their weapons on him would pose the greatest challenge. The sponsors of the Dao Larashi armed their fighters well, but none were perfect.

If he had to fight, he would survive.

Clearing the wall would be another matter. With the two men next to the wall, he realized it was closer to five times the height of these men, likely too high for even him to jump clear.

He'd have to fight his way out of this and wait for a better opportunity for escape, but when the moment came, he'd be ready. Survival was the first challenge.

The arc of opponents slowed their approach.

He could reach them quickly, but not before they reacted; a risk, but he'd only get one chance at the first move and it had to take them by surprise to gain the greatest advantage.

A little longer and a little closer. Je'Rol waited, his blood burning through him with the transformation of his demon half. Teeth sharpened and claws extended their full, curved length. Muscles tightened.

Close now.

He bared his teeth with a loud growl, his tongue sliding over the sharpening points. One of the men hesitated but continued in the next second.

Sensing the threat and the thrill, the beast struggled for escape, but the magic worked for him this time. This was his fight, and he needed his reasoning. Blind instinct for killing wouldn't save him in this battle.

They paused as if expecting him to make that first move into their midst.

The axe would be slowest to move.

Je'Rol sprang forward, ducked towards the wall and dodged back as the axe came down where he had been. A split second later, two inch claws sank deep into the man's neck. One down.

But the others had already moved.

A flash of movement.

Je'Rol rolled away and sprang up before the metal net rang its song of links. Not exactly a swift weapon, but the broadsword swung a heartbeat later, too late.

Too slow. These humans couldn't match his speed.

Je'Rol landed several lengths away. The sport raced through his veins and the beast raged but stayed within its cage. The scent of fresh blood invigorated him with the desire for more, especially knowing the beast was under control.

Four men fanned out, abandoning their dead companion.

The man with the chain would be next, on the far left now. Je'Rol had only to wait for them to close the distance.

He crouched in preparation to make the leap, feeling the distance and the effort he needed to close it.

One of the men dropped his net and charged with the spiked club ready to strike.

Bad timing, but he'd make the most of it. Je'Rol leapt for the man with the chain, which swung towards him. Upon coming down with claws poised to strike away the links, pain stung his leg. He caught the movement of a spear swinging through the air trailing droplets of blood.

On landing, Je'Rol collapsed but rolled before the chain smashed him. Barely did he roll to his feet that the chain swung to catch his wrist and wrapped itself around. Stinging points of blood oozed over his sleeve, shredding fabric and sinking into his flesh.

Without thinking, he grabbed the barbed chain end and yanked it from the fighter. He immediately swung it at the other three rushing him, ignoring the pain in his wrist. It drove them back, but only for a moment.

Je'Rol leapt clear as the man whose chain he'd taken stabbed with a sword. Two knives sunk into the soil barely a breath after he left it, thrown from behind.

Blood ran down the sleeve of his shirt, the wounds stinging but not intolerable.

At the pinnacle of his jump, he twisted his arm to free it of the chain with his other hand grasping the smooth end. Upon landing, he swung the spiked end and caught one of the fighters in the jaw.

The man staggered back, but Je'Rol found himself fending off three others amid boos and cheers from above.

The beast growled for escape as he swung his claws blindly and whirled and ducked a metal net and a spear. A second later, he slashed and caught soft flesh. A knife fell to the dirt.

He twirled the chain above his head, driving them back and giving him a moment to catch his breath.

It didn't last. The moment he took his eyes off the men on one side, the clink of metal warned him a fraction of a second before they struck.

Je'Rol tipped the chain and twisted his body to follow. It made contact with metal, knocking one of the fighters to his back and sending the two parts of a shattered spear rolling into the remains of the goblin and the strewn guts of an arachnoid natter.

A heartbeat later, Je'Rol leapt clear of the net ringing through the air. When the chain gave a tug, it pulled him down faster than he expected.

He twisted, catching sight of the man with the broken jaw sitting in the dirt, severely wounded but not dead.

Two down. Three to kill.

Je'Rol landed with the three before him, where he could see them all at once. The pain in his leg and wrist rose to his awareness, but he refused to let it distract him from survival. He could give it attention after defeating these Dao warriors.

The end of the chain had caught the net, but the man who'd thrown the net now held the end of the chain beyond the barbed end. Foolish humans.

Je'Rol yanked, intending to rip it through the man's hands, shredding them in the process, but the man let go. The chain flew back at Je'Rol, who stepped away for it to thump into the dirt.

Pain struck his side, knocking the breath from his lungs.

Je'Rol slashed back with a roar and whirled on the man with the club. Every movement now consisted of pain ripping through his right side and every breath caused agony.

But the demon in him fought back and gave him strength. He pounced on his attacker.

A swift duck of the barbed club spared his shoulders and head, and a low slash in the same movement left the man staggering. Je'Rol swiped up into the man's jaw as a new pain landed upon him and blocked part of his vision.

His victim stumbled and fell back while he whirled, or tried to, beneath the metal net. His movement to face his newest attacker dug hundreds of tiny needles into his head and shoulders. He threw off the net, ignoring the puncturing of his flesh, more concerned by the sword he narrowly avoided.

One clawed hand shot out and grabbed the man's wrist, digging in to draw blood. Still the man clung to his sword, a defiant gleam in his eyes.

It died with a slash of claws across his throat in a movement that landed Je'Rol facing his last opponent.

Breathing hard, he swiped his sleeve across his face, smearing his own blood from his eyes in time to avoid the thrust of a sword in his side. The man's only calculated mistake.

The human didn't have the chance for another. Je'Rol jabbed his claws under the man's arm, a merciful blow but only because he'd lost his speed from the distraction of the pain in his side. The man swung his sword in a futile attempt to recover, but Je'Rol was quicker, despite slowing down, and gave a half-hearted slash across the man's throat that left the man gasping and gagging on his own blood like the others and finally falling to his knees.

Silence surrounded him, except for the scrape of movement to his left.

Blood dripping into his eyes nearly blinded Je'Rol to the man with the broken jaw attempting to stand. Je'Rol straightened from his hunched fatigue and walked to the man.

"Gi' 'e. 'ea!" The man begged in a whisper without using his bottom jaw, which was knocked out of place and bleeding.

The Dao Larashi was a fight to the death. This was the last man, and one begging for death. He had no use living with a broken jaw, but the pitiful sight stayed Je'Rol's hand. Sharp teeth and claws shrank with the quieting of the beast, his chest heaving for breath.

Je'Rol looked up at the faces staring down. They had their show. He'd proven his skills against five men at once. Why did he need to kill the last?

From a section at the farthest end of the crowds covered in a deep purple and gold canopy, a few dozen men and women in the finest raiment gazed at him.

The doors through which Je'Rol had come opened to his right, releasing a river of Li'Ador in their black and silver armor, weapons poised. They formed a circle around Je'Rol and the last fighter, but moved no closer.

"Oo i'," the man said. Without the use of his tongue, he was hard to understand. He'd never survive, even if Je'Rol spared his life.

Claws grew out at his bidding. The man stood his ground but made no move to fight.

In one slash, it was done.

The Li'Ador closed in and the sorceress stepping forward, her tawny skin and long black hair standing out from the circle of uniforms and weapons. She stopped two strides away, her eyes on the covered area at the farthest end.

His escape would have to wait for another time. He had no energy left to attempt it there. The loss of blood and his internal injuries weakened him, but he would recover in a couple days, thanks to his demon side; while he wasn't immortal like a demonlord, he healed much quicker than a human. And he'd endured worse.

The crowds sat in silence, waiting as a figure under the awning rose in his dark robes.

Je'Rol ignored the sorceress, who stood close enough to cool his skin when her breath blew across his neck. "You did well," she whispered.

"You will live to fight again, half-blood," a deep voice rang from the far end of the arena.

A collective sigh rose from the stands, releasing him as if he'd been held by strings. The buzz of conversations rose into a din.

"Come." Liandra directed him out with the Li'Ador. He didn't object, desiring instead to rest and clean the stench of blood from himself.

## Chapter 7

After two days of rest, Je'Rol stood in the arena again, this time topless. Most of his wounds had healed already, although his ribs still ached. None of the external wounds had gone deeper than a couple inches into non-vital tissues, and his muscles healed more quickly than humans'.

The moment he stepped into the light, the audience's roar echoed through the arena, making his ears ache. He pressed his palms over them, his eyes fixed on the two open doors ahead to his left and his right.

Through one, a young man ran out in rags, his pants torn from his shins, exposing bare feet. He appeared to wear a helmet of scales over his head and neck and armor over parts of his shoulders and back.

Je'Rol inhaled sharply. It wasn't a helmet but actual silvery scales, which reflected the sunlight in mini-spectrums at certain angles when he moved. A half-blood of the sea demonlords? The boy's eyes caught Je'Rol's and dark claws extended from the boy's fingers longer than Je'Rol thought possible.

The boy couldn't be a half-blood from any of the demonlords of the sea, not with claws like those. Those weren't fish scales, but something worse. He hoped he didn't have to fight the kid; it would be no match for him, claws or not.

Behind them both, the doors closed.

But the third door remained open. A high-pitched shriek followed by a thump rang from inside.

The crowds above quieted.

Voices shouted and something shrieked and groaned in a deep, threatening tone.

Je'Rol tensed and backed away with the boy, his claws extending for whatever demon appeared. Something dark slithered through the doorway and hesitated. Not slithered, but wound on countless tiny legs.

"Stay close. If we work together, we might both survive."

The boy's eyes shot to him in a look of panic. "Who are you?"

"You're only ally. Watch yourself!"

Something in red and black stripes scurried out on two legs, with two odd arms—the best comparison he could make—that ended in long, hooked claws opening and snapping shut. Tusks curled up from its jaw.

The first natter twisted its segments to bring its head around and rose up, revealing five holes along its bottom puckering and opening to expose snapping beaks. Its tiny legs rippled with movement in the air.

Although no bigger than young children, both demons were nasty creatures that could disembowel a man in seconds.

Still more natters came, evading the voices of men shouting from within. Some had four legs, some eight, some slithered on none. None was like another, but natters came in any combination, as if in the creation of the world, the universe couldn't make up its mind, until it finally settled on the lowly insects and animals that now dominated Derandria.

But natters were still demons, the lowest, but still of some nasty abilities.

They went for the boy first. He slashed and growled and ripped at them with the ferocity of the blood rage.

When they came for him, Je'Rol was ready.

A couple managed to inflict some injuries, but nothing serious. The Dao fighters had been harsher and far more cunning.

The fighting wasn't done, though.

More natters were driven in to face them, surrounding him and the boy, who roared in the blind fury of the blood rage, claws extended and teeth sharp, his face extending slightly in the partial transformation. The kid wasn't ready, and a sinking feeling dropped into Je'Rol's gut that the boy wouldn't survive.

No time to worry about him. The natters swarmed around them.

One of the many-legged insectoid natters wrapped itself around his leg while he fought off several others. Five small beaks speared into his flesh.

Je'Rol roared and slashed at the hard, shell-like segments covering its body, but only when he caught the body tight around him and pulled it in half did it release itself.

One of the furry creatures caught his claw in its mouth and shrieked. Je'Rol twisted his hand to slice claws along the softer flesh. The creature opened its mouth to howl in pain, releasing his arm.

While he finished that one, another leapt at him. Je'Rol sprang free of the natters around him and caught the jumper in the air with a swipe of his claw.

A cry yanked out his heart and made him look. Natters swarmed over the boy, overwhelming him. Anger rose up, taunting the beast within Je'Rol. They should never have expected a boy, even a half-blood, to be capable of fighting off so many demons. He wasn't ready. Faced with the dozen that had attacked him, Je'Rol had barely survived. How could they expect a boy to fight?

Damn them—natters and the men and demonlords who supported the Dao Larashi, especially the demonlords and their lust for human flesh. If he ever found the obelisk of Mai'Kari, he'd control them and command them to give up their ways.

Je'Rol landed amid the swarming natters, slashing left and right to free the boy somewhere beneath while the demons turned to attack him.

Sweat and blood poured over him amid the growling, snarling, shrieking, snapping, biting mass of bodies.

After enduring countless wounds, Je'Rol finished off the last of the natters. He reached the boy too late. Only a bloody pulp of flesh and bone remained. The natters had worked fast, but Je'Rol bore the wounds to prove that not even he was quick enough to avoid their hungry mouths. The boy could have been him at one time, a lifetime ago when he didn't want to fight, before he'd left home.

Before he'd lost his innocence to the beast within him.

They had no right to force this on the boy!

The scrape of doors alerted him to the opening from which he had come in.

Rather than the Li'Ador as he expected, a lone figure stepped in wearing armor like that worn by the warriors he'd fought a few days ago gleaming in the height of the midday sun.

Je'Rol stepped past the bloody body of the youth, his emotions boiling into a rage. The lone figure would be no match for him, even in his weakened state. Claws and teeth extended and a growl rumbled from his throat. He'd had enough of this fighting and bloodshed. What was one more death?

He raced to the warrior, claws ready to end it quickly.

As the doors slammed closed, he ducked a swift stroke from a curved blade that flashed into existence, not like any weapon he'd seen before and definitely not a sword, not with a point at both ends and a handle in the middle, but more like a double sword.

Je'Rol rolled in the dust and sprang to his feet.

Three strides away, the warrior stood facing him, a lust for blood glinting in dark eyes beneath the helm with its extended bottom fanned out to protect the neck. They'd learned his swiftest killing method and prepared this one. Then Je'Rol would have to find another way.

Still breathing hard from his fight with the natters, Je'Rol stood his ground, the rumble of his growl drowned by the voices above, which hushed over his continued stillness.

The warrior twirled the wickedly curved blade in a threatening demonstration of skill.

A small laugh ground from Je'Rol's throat. The man was good with his weapons, but take those away and he'd have nothing.

Blood continued to cool his body where it flowed from fresh wounds, and its heavy scent overpowered any others that might have provided clues about the man. The warrior before him was fresh and unharmed, but that would give him no advantage over Je'Rol's anger and the beast within him.

That beast hungered for death, but the blood rage wasn't from the beast. Rather, it came from Je'Rol. Vengeance surged through him, as if this man represented those he hated for what they had done.

The warrior stepped aside, and Je'Rol followed, keeping his distance so he moved around a circle with the man.

After a few steps, the man frowned. "Attack, half-blood."

"Make me." No one commanded him. Here he was free of the sorceress to make his own decisions, and he was injured. The brief reprieve had cooled his emotions, but anger still raged in his heart over the senseless waste of the boy's life for their entertainment. Reason had taken over once more, the reason to judge how best to survive this fight.

The man settled his blade into a position and launched himself at Je'Rol.

Finally.

Je'Rol dodged the blade once, but the man was fast. Pain shot through Je'Rol's side.

But the blade was nowhere near him.

Not that blade. From somewhere hidden, the man had pulled a dagger.

Je'Rol glanced down at the red slit across his ribs. No time to contemplate. The warrior moved swiftly at him again with the intent of finishing him.

Je'Rol dodged both blades and whirled to catch both arms in his claws and squeezed, but the leather bracers were thick. He squeezed with all his strength to penetrate the thick leather, and his claws sank deep into soft flesh. Blood dripped to the dry ground, blending with the stains of countless others, including himself.

The warrior's arms slackened and a hard helm slammed Je'Rol in the head. The ring of metal against his skull startled him into releasing his grip and threw him off balance away from his attacker.

What had he been doing?

No time to think. The armored man stabbed with his blade and Je'Rol rolled away.

As the blades whirled and stabbed down, Je'Rol kicked up and caught the middle handle.

The double-ended sword-staff flew from the man's grasp.

Encouraged by his success, Je'Rol rolled to his feet. A second later, his claws slashed down the man's ribs under his left arm. Two leather straps caught but gave under the sharp edge of his claws, loosening the man's armor.

Pain stabbed through Je'Rol's shoulder, crunching through bone and muscle. He'd forgotten about the dagger, now sunk deep into his shoulder. The beast snarled for retribution, guiding his claws across the man's arm to knock it away.

The warrior staggered back, his nearest side and the underside of his opposite forearm bleeding, while Je'Rol yanked the small weapon from his flesh. Pain surged through his arm, making it all but useless.

The warrior recovered his double bladed sword and wielded it in both hands. The pulpy right arm moved little, the man wincing with each movement now.

The end was near, and the gasp from the crowd said they knew. One of the combatants would die soon.

It wouldn't be him.

Je'Rol snarled through clenched teeth to hide the whimper from the pain of his movements. He held his injured arm close to his body to keep it steady. His other hand flexed with five daggers of his own ready for striking and, by his own will, the teeth of a tiger extended.

The warrior faltered, his weapon tipping in a hint of weakness.

Je'Rol rushed forward, knocked the weapon aside and sank his teeth into the warm muscle of the man's good arm.

The warrior dropped his weapon as Je'Rol stabbed four long claws into the soft area beneath his ribs.

Two seconds later, those same claws sunk into the exposed narrow gap of the man's neck between the helm and the armor.

Lord Chandroya's champion crumpled to the ground in a bloody mess, the metal of his armor clanging through the silence hanging over the arena.

Je'Rol breathed hard, standing over the man as the life faded from his eyes. He'd seen it more than he ever wanted, but in other battles, he'd fled before he caught the end.

Claws shrank and teeth returned to normal with the numbness of pain threatening to steal him into unconsciousness.

He staggered backwards and dared to lift his head. The group of well-adorned lords and ladies under the canopy to his left whispered amongst themselves. Opposite them sat another group of men and women, the goblins among them staring with their large, bulbous eyes. A familiar face among a halo of golden hair met his eyes with a hint of a smile, the only sign of approval among the severe scowls or neutral gazes of the representatives of the other clans.

The thunder of footsteps accompanied the clatter of weapons as the black and silver of the Li'Ador surrounded him. He had no strength left to fight.

"Well done." The sensuous voice sparked the beast into a growl.

He wanted to wipe the smile off the sorceress's smug face but the will to fight seeped away with the blood of many wounds. Too weak to argue, Je'Rol followed her from the arena.

"It is done," she said in the dark corridors of the holding area. "You performed better than we hoped. After you rest, your greatest performance is to come."

## Chapter 8

In his dreams, Je'Rol found it hard to escape the surge of natters rising like a tidal wave to overcome him. His feet refused to move as panic swept over him ahead of the growing mountain of snapping, biting, drooling fangs, teeth, pincers, and mandibles.

The beast roared in challenge, extending claws and teeth and deepening into a rage he could not nor would not subdue.

At the first of the wave, he slashed wildly, and still they came at him. He snarled and fought, unable to move his feet, while determined not to let them eat him alive.

From their midst rose a form, the boy. A second later, the boy's skin melted away, exposing bone and shredded flesh. The corpse lunged for him.

Je'Rol growled and tried to fight him off, but the figure grew and squeezed him between giant, bloody palms, strangling and crushing him.

He gasped and bolted upright from a soft pad, loose hair brushing one bare and one bandaged shoulder with the sudden movement. He lifted a claw before him and noted the trembling in the sunlight from the three small windows along the wall beside him. The claws retracted to normal hands.

"Bad dreams?" A familiar voice shook away the horror of the dream.

Je'Rol held a hand up to block the sun. In the corner of the room, a lithe figure stretched her legs as she sat up from a red chaise, the exposed areas of skin covered in tattoos. Liandra. Now what did she want from him?

"Where am I?" This obviously wasn't his cell in the holding area, the prison of the Kairashun. His wounds had healed, although a few wraps still covered him, and his shoulder still ached where the fighter had stabbed the dagger in deep.

"Lord Chandroya's palace in the upper gardens. You put on a very good show and earned your reward." Liandra brushed aside a loose strand of black hair, exposing the tattoos along her face. "A long rest, compliments of Lord Bannon."

Compliments? His being there was anything but complimentary. They wanted something from him yet. "You promised my freedom."

Her lips twisted into a sly smile. "So I did, but you haven't put on your best performance yet." With all the seductiveness he expected, she slid from the lounge and crawled to him on hands and knees.

He should kill her and escape, but the spark of fire in his chest warned him from such thoughts. Her scent surrounded him, the bloody reek that had overwhelmed all other odors in the arena only a memory.

She leaned her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "You will be presented to Lord Chandroya as a gift. When that happens...you must kill him, Je'Rol. If you wish your freedom, that will be the only way. The Li'Ador will not be present. Lord Chandroya believes I have full control, but I won't stop you."

"Why?" Why should he kill a man for their purposes? But now he understood the reason for the Dao Larashi; he had demonstrated that he could fight while keeping the beast in check, gaining the trust of the local human lord so he would be allowed alone with him to carry out the

assassination planned by another who sought his power. Afterwards, they would probably present him to the demonlords for execution.

She sat back on her legs and smoothed away the hair from his face, brushing it behind his shoulders and watching her hands rather than meeting his eyes.

"He is a traitor," she said, her fingers tracing the muscles of his bare chest, pausing at crusted sores nearly healed.

Je'Rol tried to ignore the soft caress, but when her hands went to the light blanket still covering his legs, he caught her wrist.

Amusement lit in her dark eyes. "So modest."

Reason caught up in that moment and he released her wrist. He'd been lying there naked while she'd likely treated his wounds and assisted with whatever process had cleaned the blood off. She'd had plenty of opportunity to poke and prod to her pleasure. Her pleasure was the least he cared about, but she seemed to like what she saw.

It was the last time she would see it.

"Where are my clothes?"

Liandra turned to a low table a ways behind her. A fresh shirt and leather breeches lay across it.

Conscious of her watching him but not caring what she thought, he stood and walked past her.

"You really should reconsider."

He'd reconsider nothing, except escaping to continue his search for the obelisk.

Je'Rol lifted the shirt up and over his head mostly with one arm. The bandaged shoulder stung when he lifted that arm too high, but he clenched his jaw on the pain of pushing his arm through.

The shirt hung loose, a light blouse that tied at his chest, much like his old one. He pulled on the breeches, glad he stood with his back to the sorceress when he winced in pain as he shoved his leg through; each of the five wounds from where the natter had taken chunks of flesh with its beaks stung on contact from the scabs still healing. He pulled the breeches up and finished dressing, inhaling sharply at a jolt of pain when he lifted his shoulder the wrong way.

"You haven't healed fully."

"It's enough." He slipped the vest on and fastened it over the blouse, his long hair loose over his shoulders falling in the way. "Where's the strap?"

She rose and glided to him, her hand rising to dangle a leather strip between her thumb and forefinger.

He grabbed for it, but she snatched it away, her other hand reaching for his hair. "You should reconsider staying longer."

A low growl rumbled from his throat. "I won't be a part of your games." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her close to reach her other hand. The smirk on her face grated on his patience, along with her tight fingers around the leather piece, which required both his hands to pry open.

"Your demonlord mistress won't help you."

He hesitated only a moment, but she caught it; the smirk on her face climbed higher.

"Was she good to you, Je'Rol?" Her sultry voice slowed his fingers around hers. "Tell me what she promised you."

He met her dark eyes with defiance, which ignited the burning in his chest. He could fight it. He must fight it. Liandra was a sorceress, the last person who should learn of the obelisk and the

mission the demonlord had asked of him. What the golden lady had promised had been nothing. She'd never promised to help him. That thought cooled the burning.

"Nothing."

She gave a soft snort. "I find that hard to believe. What does a demonlord want with a mere half-blood?"

He yanked the strap from her loosened fingers and stepped back. "Nothing that concerns you."

"Everything about demons concerns me," she said.

To escape her, he turned his back. For all he cared, she could watch him use his claws to comb through his hair and tie it back.

"Tell me what she did, Je'Rol."

No, he wanted to argue. Instead he bit his tongue and focused on the tranquility of the sunlight on his face. The pressure to open his mouth and explain the lady's work to break Liandra's spell on him waned.

He'd been right—she had no power over the human side. Only when the beast rose with the faltering of his control could she control him.

A smirk of triumph touched his lips.

"Did she please you?" The hands on his side could have been reaching for his heart with a knife.

He inhaled and let it out slowly. Let her do as she wanted; he wouldn't let his irritation take root and call up the demon side. That was her goal. She needed that to control him. Staying calm was his best defense and the one she hated most.

"Tell me what she did, Je'Rol," the sorceress whispered. "You are mine. You obey me."

Not any more.

He finished tying his hair after wrapping the leather strap down a length of tail and his ears caught the faint snick of a door.

"Excuse me, *Serae*." The young girl at the door blushed, her hands full with the silver tray. "I was told to bring food for you and your guest."

Liandra's fingers dug into his sides, while the clatter of laden trays told him the young servant set them on the table. The faint scent of cooked meat, seasoned vegetables, and fresh bread teased his tongue.

Any reason to move away from the sorceress was good for him. Je'Rol turned as the young woman backed out and closed the door. Hungry, he lifted the shiny silver cover from a steaming plate heaped with a variety of foods and another with lighter portions. Delectable scents poured from the food, begging him to fill his empty stomach.

The food disappeared from the full plate faster than Liandra finished one portion of her meal. Afterwards, Je'Rol wiped his face and stood, having no intention of waiting. He'd waited long enough to escape the sorceress's control. With his health restored and his stomach filled, he was ready to return to the wilds and continue his search for true freedom from the demon side.

"You can't leave yet," she said.

Yes, he could. He grabbed the door handle. Fire burned through his chest. Not this time. He refused to let it stop him.

Grunting in exertion, he pulled the door open.

Two Li'Ador stood on either side of the door, with others spaced throughout the airy corridor.

His heart beat faster, but the fire didn't increase. It didn't have to—the soldiers turned to face him.

"Come back inside with me," Liandra's voice coaxed.

No. He refused to listen.

The Li'Ador approached with swords and staffs drawn. He'd faced a swarm of natters and five armed men at once in the Dao Larashi, but he wouldn't be a match for all the Li'Ador.

"You'll be more comfortable. I can assure you."

Growling, Je'Rol backed in and slammed the door closed. When the time came, he'd escape. She said the Li'Ador would not be there when she and Lord Bannon presented him to Lord Chandroya.

The recent nightmare flashed its gory images from the depths of his memories. He closed his eyes, but the mutilated body of the boy grew clearer. He couldn't forget. That boy could have been him. They had no right to make the child fight. None!

The beast rose up with his anger, clawing his emotions for release to satisfy the need for vengeance. He refused to soothe it.

Liandra's touch snapped the leash on his emotions. The fire burst from his chest and he clawed to tear it out, snarling.

"Stop it!" Worry shrieked in Liandra's voice, the pitch ripe with fear.

His fingers touched the scab on his chest around a small, smooth object. She hadn't revived her magic; then she must not have known.

Je'Rol dug claws into his own flesh, determined to dig out whatever her soldiers had planted on him before he'd killed them all.

Pain coursed through him but nothing worse than what he had endured from the natters or fighters. Liandra's fingers dug into his arm, but he wouldn't give in. He couldn't.

If he would listen to her, everything would be all right.

No. That was her dispirit power over the demon side.

No! Je'Rol ripped the skin off his chest to remove whatever she'd planted on him. "No!"

The fire stopped and Liandra stepped back, nearly stumbling over the lounge. "No! That's impossible!"

Je'Rol opened his bloody hand and turned over the crimson flesh. On the other side, a pea-sized stone peeked its green face from the smear of blood with blackened skin around it. He held it towards her, aware of the cooling lines of blood gluing the blouse to his chest. "What is it?"

"Impossible." Her eyes rose from the pulp in his hands to his face. "How did you—"

He threw the small chunk of flesh and blood at the wall, spattering the white linens on which he had slept with specks of red. "You will not control me!"

She stared at him, a glint of fear in her eyes, but didn't back away. As much as he wanted to slash her to death, he couldn't. Instead, he opened the door, ready for the Li'Ador.

\* \* \*

Coming out of the blood rage was never easy. Je'Rol remembered only bits and pieces, glimpses of fighting a dozen different Li'Ador throughout the palace and later sinking his teeth into an innocent woman of tawny skin like the sorceress. He could only guess that some part of his mind had imagined the woman was Liandra and punished her as he had only hoped to do to the real sorceress.

He had let Liandra live, being more intent on his escape than another death at his hands. Besides, if he had attacked her, she would have gained control over him once more. He'd fled to avoid that confrontation. Unfortunately, an innocent young woman had died at the hands of the beast in retribution for her torment.

The stench of blood filled his nostrils and covered him head to foot. The beast had been sated. But it wasn't blood that soaked him; or, rather, it was, but it was diluted.

A wave of dizziness tried to send him falling into the cold around his legs, but something caught him.

"Careful," a man's voice said.

Je'Rol blinked away the hazy images, the face staring at him vaguely familiar. Dark eyes matched a dark tail of hair at the top of a man's head, but the armor with its ornate details now smeared with blood gave away his status as bear clan. His mouth formed a hard line that could have been a verbal reprimand.

"Deep breath."

Je'Rol barely had time before being shoved down into the cold depths of water. He struggled against the arms securing him, his lungs ready to burst, but not even his strength could free him of the hold on each arm and the pressure on his shoulders.

Demonlords; more than one.

His brain barely had time to register through the panic of drowning when the pressure holding him down vanished and he sprang above the surface of the water, gasping for breath and coughing.

"Better," a different voice grumbled. "He'll need more than a dunk to remove the stench, but it's tolerable now."

Je'Rol twisted, his arms still held firmly by two of the bear clan in their armor. Other demonlords surrounded him, but not all of them were bear clan; actually, only the two holding him were Ur'Asu. The others stood among bushes and trees on the banks of the river, in whose cool waters he stood with the two Ur'Asu. By the fancy robes on some and the breeches on others and the colors of skin and hair on others similar to their natural states, he recognized a few of them in their human form. Still others didn't bother to hide their true forms.

The golden lady was not among them.

"What do you want?" Suspicion gnawed in his gut, especially since he was still alive.

They sloshed through the water with him to one side of the river, still holding his arms as if he was a threat to them if turned loose.

A woman in brown breeches and tunic stepped forward, her hair knotted around her head in a crown of myriad shades of brown. She reached for his chest and yanked the shirt open, and her face tightened in a clear show of irritation. "Where is it?"

"What?"

"The am'taerad, the stone. It was sealed in your flesh when you fought. Where is it?"

If they meant the stone Liandra had fixed on him to control him when she wasn't awake, he had left it with her. "The sorceress."

Rage erupted across the woman's face, but she quickly regained control and motioned to a group across the river. From the rustle of leaves behind him, he knew they had departed.

"You should have brought it to us."

"Why?" Why did they desire that damned rock? What would they do with it? What was special about it? Why would they even think he would help them?

The two Ur'Asu shoved him to the ground at the woman's feet as a man in silvery white and black robes stepped forward, his white hair shimmering over his shoulders in the slant of sunlight with the black mixed in it. His face was among the fairest of the demonlords in human form, his movements smooth and purposeful with nothing wasted. "All should fear the am'taerad in the hands of the Adepts of Te'Mea." His voice matched his movements, steady and confident but without the arrogance of most demonlords he had encountered.

Pale blue eyes fixed on Je'Rol, a slight lift of one white brow sparking curiosity. A voice whispered in his head, "I have been searching for you."

"It must be destroyed," the demonlord said. "Only a few remain in existence, and we are fortunate to have discovered this one linking you to the sorceress. She will give up her precious control, if she wishes to live."

"Why didn't you take it from her?"

"We could not. The magic of such talismans is old, from a time before our kind."

"The sorcerers possess a power you can't control?"

"Enough!" The woman cast a severe look to Je'Rol.

"You must join me, or your life is forfeit."

Je'Rol blinked, unsure if he had heard what he thought he heard as a voice in his head. If he had, he wasn't going down without a fight, whether he had to risk another blood rage or not. The sorceress had said the same thing as that voice, although in her own dominating way.

"You've said too much, Lord Je'Kaoron." She scanned the faces around her. "We'll soon have the am'taerad. Getting them out of human hands is our only concern."

How could the mortal sorcerers control a power the demonlords didn't understand? He had a feeling the man before him would explain, but if he understood correctly, the situation for him was grim. The demonlords wouldn't let him live.

"Dispose of him," the woman said.

The beast rose in defiance within, its growl rumbling in Je'Rol's throat as claws extended. They might have caught him while in the blood rage, but as himself, he could think through his actions with reason rather than react with the instincts of the beast. He could figure out how to escape, if he survived a battle with demonlords.

"Wait." The calm command of the tiger demonlord stopped the others from moving in. "He is mine by the caer sekiya numa. His judgment is the right of the Je'Gri."

"Judgment?" A man in green robes snorted, his shoulder-length dark hair twisted around a crown piece that passed over his brow. "What judgment but death is there? He is half-blood, an abomination and unsuitable for this world."

"But he is of my clan. By rights of the caer sekiya numa, he is ours to judge with the traitor who soiled our clan's purity. You cannot deny that."

Death here or death later—what did it matter? Je'Rol prepared to flee. While they argued in their own language, he waited for a chance to escape.

The Je'Gri representative glanced down at him. "Calm yourself. You have one chance to live, if you join me."

The demonlord had spoken to him. He was the voice in Je'Rol's head. It had to be, but none of them had ever bothered to speak in his mind before. Obviously, the demonlord didn't want the others to know of their conversation. Why? What did he plan?

His curiosity piqued, Je'Rol shrank the claws and calmed himself. The beast reluctantly retreated to the deep recesses of his heart. One less blood rage was one more chance to live.

The others fell silent, lending an eerie quiet to the wilderness which no animal dared break. They turned to Lord Je'Kaoron.

The woman in brown curled her lip in a snarl. "He is yours, Lord Je'Kaoron, but the dishonor is yours if he escapes."

The tiger demonlord bowed his head to her. "That is well understood. We will go now." He motioned to Je'Rol to stand. "Walk with me."

Je'Rol obeyed, if only to satisfy his curiosity. He had not left the humans to become a victim of the demonlords' laws concerning half-bloods.

"Do not look back. You must show subservience, or I will have to kill you."

That would never happen as long as he stayed alert, but he was no match for the demonlord. As ordered, he didn't look back, but heard the assembly of demonlords moving and wondered how many prepared to follow to ensure that he didn't escape from Lord Je'Kaoron.

Away to the right, across the river and through the trees, loomed the outer wall of Dev Nadir. They should have sent soldiers after him, unless the demonlords had made arrangements.

"What happened?"

The demonlord lifted his chin higher. "I assume you mean before you returned from the blood rage?" His voice contained a calm that contrasted the spite of every other demonlord Je'Rol had crossed.

"Yes." The blood rage, aptly named for the desire of the demon side for the flesh of other creatures leading to the heavy blood spillage. He reeked of it, most of it not his own, despite the dunking in the river, which had left him soaked and chilled.

"You escaped Chandroya's palace...with some help from Lady Su'Tari. But you were unreasonable in the blood rage and attacked everyone. How fortunate that you should escape then, as we met to discuss...details."

The way he said that irked Je'Rol, but he restrained his desire for "details" of his own. Instead, he clenched his fists and said nothing, waiting for the demonlord to explain further.

"The Ur'Asu warriors restrained you and carried you from the city to where the rest of us had agreed to meet. Your timing was no less than perfect, Je'Rol."

Perfect for them, but it had done nothing for him. "What do you want of me?"

The demonlord's lip curved up slightly at the corner in the barest show of amusement. "You know the answer."

"My death?" Je'Rol growled, his muscles tight in preparation to fight. He should have jumped clear at that moment, but something held him back, a curiosity piqued by the whispers in his head. Those words hinted of something more than death awaiting him.

The demonlord tipped his head as if listening to something for a few seconds. "We must leave this land. There's nothing here for you."

"But you would take me away only to kill me anyway."

"Hush! We're being watched. I'll tell you after we're away." The harsh lines of reprimand replaced the soft lines on the demonlord's face.

Je'Rol turned his head at the rustle of leaves to his right but caught only a glimpse of colorful plumage before it disappeared.

Why should he go with this demonlord? He owed them nothing. Worse, Je'Kaoron was tiger clan, like his father, the man Je'Rol had sworn he would kill after the first time facing the realities of what he was and again since realizing the life he could never have.

They traveled through the wilderness along the river and crested a rugged hill to gaze down on a small harbor far from the city walls, which shrank away as they traveled. Je'Rol hadn't expected to find another harbor up the coast.

It wasn't as much of a harbor, though, as it was a natural occlusion of land hooked around an inlet of water at the mouth of the river, where fresh water and salt water mingled in a dance of blues and greens. In the darker blue near the hook of land, a ship berthed.

How strange to consider traveling to the Je'Gri domain. He'd never visited it for fear of his life and being unable to force himself to set foot in his mother's homeland. Her dire warnings had stuck in his mind with the other hard feelings, building a resistance to the idea of ever searching the land of Tikeros for the obelisk.

That resistance slowed each step he took, the mental effort of fighting it equal to walking through hardening mud.

He could escape. Only one demonlord would pursue him, but it was upon Je'Kaoron's honor to do so and he probably wouldn't give up. Je'Rol stood no chance against a demonlord in battle, and he had spent the last year searching the continent of Karaligo and found nothing. No matter where he went, his life was at risk, but the tiger demonlord seemed more generous than most in allowing him to live. Going would also provide safe passage to Tikeros, where Je'Rol could escape to continue his search.

They continued in silence to the harbor, where Je'Rol noticed a crew preparing the rigging upon their approach. The scent of sea air broke through the reek of blood, which had transformed into something putrid as it dried. Changing, or at least cleaning, what he wore would be his first priority, then rest. Whatever he had done in the blood rage had left him fatigued.

Upon setting foot on the plank ramp to the main deck, Je'Rol noticed a familiar odor—dirty, sweaty humans. Men labored on the ship, not a crew of demonlords. It only made sense, as humans were also slave labor for their demonlord masters, like any animal.

Je'Kaoron watched him, those pale blue eyes cool. "Go on." His voice was too calm, as if he expected no argument.

Seeing no other choice except death, Je'Rol climbed the ramp to the top deck with his host behind him.

A man in a stiff blue tunic and gold-edged shoulder guards with a curled hook design on the front stepped forward and offered a bow to Je'Kaoron, his dark hair tied back into a short tail at the nape of his neck. "My lord."

When he straightened, his eyes slid over Je'Rol with a curl of disapproval in his lip.

"Captain Mankin, make ready to depart."

"We are stocked and ready, my lord."

"Then set course for Tikeros."

"Yes, my lord." The captain paused and gave his tunic a tug at the bottom.

"Do not test the patience of a half-blood any more than you would your lord." Je'Kaoron's stern tone left no room for doubt. The captain's throat flashed with a swallow, his eyes wide on Je'Rol.

They would fear him more than their lord for the instability well-known of half-bloods. Je'Rol appreciated them knowing—they'd likely leave him alone, as he preferred.

"He will be judged by the Je'Gri, as is our right...Go now. Cast off, Captain."

"Yes, sir." Mankin bowed again and hurried away.

"Follow me," Je'Kaoron said, leading Je'Rol to a square opening and the steps leading to the lower decks.

Behind them, orders shot from the captain to the men, the clatter of rushing feet on the deck echoing below.

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### **About the Author**

M. A. Nilles is the darker side of Melanie Nilles. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, cats, and her horse. Her published works under the name Melanie Nilles include the Starfire Angels series and Adronis series. Her works as M. A. Nilles include the Legend of the White Dragon epic and Demon Age series, including Tiger Born. More can be found at [www.melaniennes.com](http://www.melaniennes.com).